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Jack Rabbit, THE PRAIRIE SPORT;

OR,
The Wolf Children of The Llano Estacado.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "LONG HAired PARDS," "OLD
BULL'S EYE," ETC., ETC.

PROLOGUE.

WHAT THE NIGHT-BIRD SAW.

"TO-WHIT, to-whoo—hoo—hoo—oo."

A dark, shadowy figure was silently, cautiously making its way through the luxuriant undergrowth, when the first notes of the ill-omened bird broke upon his ear, and his keen eye immediately rested upon the ruffled mass of feathers as, with head depressed and tail elevated, it croaked forth the lugubrious notes.

One tinged with superstition would have read an evil omen in this incident; but not so this man. Instead, a low, mellow laugh answered the bird as he passed on.

The owl left its perch and flew on heavy yet noiseless wing before the midnight prowler, repeating its warning note.

The dark outlines of a building uprose before the man. Pausing, he uttered a low, peculiar whistle. As though in reply, the night-bird flapped its wings and crooned forth its lengthened note from the overhanging bough. The man started and shrunk back, but then, with a low, glad cry, he sprang forward as a light, graceful figure appeared in the belt of bright moonlight surrounding the old tree.

"My jewel!" he murmured, as his strong arms wound around the yielding form and pressed it passionately to his breast. "At last—at last!"

With ruffled feathers, with head cocked knowingly, the night-bird looked down upon the lovers with its round, staring eyes. The downy plumage is suddenly ruffled, the broad tail slowly spreads as it arises, the ball-like head goes down; but the lugubrious cry is checked. The bird straightens up, its feathers lie close, it more nearly resembles a hawk ready for speedy flight.

What has alarmed it? Yonder dark, stealthy, creeping shadows? And yet—shadows seldom

carry bright weapons for the moon's beams to glint from, nor do bushes rustle, twigs crackle, the ground echo beneath the tread of shadowy, bodiless phantoms.

With a warning cry the night-bird leaves its perch and sails heavily above the lovers. The maiden shrinks back, with a little cry; the lover draws her to him, and once more their lips meet.

The bushes part. The weapon-bearing shadows dart forth. With a shriek, the white-robed maiden flees, even as her lover is stricken to the earth. The owl hoots; the silvery queen of night veils her face beneath a sable cloud.

The spot that had seemed sacred to love's whispers, now resounds with fierce oaths and curses; with the clashing of steel, the sharp detonation of fire-arms; the heavy, sickening thud-thud of vengeful blows alighting upon human flesh. And again comes that lugubrious cry.

Frightened, the night-bird sails heavily away. Over the shrubbery so thick and tangled; over the high, massive adobe wall that surrounds the garden, finally settling upon a bushy tree near the edge of the chaparral. Had instinct guided it?



"BACK—DARE TO TOUCH MY SISTER AND I'LL SHOOT YOU LIKE A COYOTE!" HE SAID, IN A LOW, STERN VOICE."

Trampling heavily, four men came slowly through the night, dragging between them what seemed a dead or dying man. They paused close beside the tree—beneath the ruins of what had once been the pride of that stunted forest, now a gaunt, leafless, lightning-scarred skeleton.

The night-bird bent its eyes knowingly upon the scene.

The lover lay, bound and helpless, at the feet of his enemies. One of them spoke—cold, contemptuous, yet biting words. Words that told of man's duplicity and woman's treachery. Then he bowed over the prisoner. As he arose, the moon shone forth with increased splendor.

Blood was flowing from the captive's head. The tall, dark man was pinning something to the lightning-scarred tree-trunk.

They were human ears!

As though frightened by the scent of human blood, the night-bird flapped its wings and sailed away, its ominous cry growing fainter and less distinct.

The moon sailed on. The insects chirped and trilled. The owl occasionally sounded its note while sailing over the chaparral, gradually nearing the dead tree. Noiselessly parting the air, the ominous bird rolled its staring eyes round the spot. The ground was free—the intruders had gone.

Then it slowly settled down. Not upon the dead bough, but upon something that swayed to and fro, suspended from the sturdy limb, uttering its melancholy dirge:

"*To-whit, to-whoo—hoo—hoo—oo—o!*"

CHAPTER I.

WILD SCENES IN THE DESERT.

"It's bad manners ye show, old man Tony, interrupting a gentleman when he's dining—and that after a good forty-mile ride, too."

The voice was a rich, clear one, though slightly drawling, and the speaker raised his head with a reproachful glance of his big black eyes, then resumed a manful struggle with the chunk of tough jerked meat, though still watching his comrade, who made a series of quick gestures.

"So—a dust-cloud; coming this way; lance points—that means red-skins, then, for devil a Greaser ever had pluck enough to carry lance so far from their holes!" and the mustached lips curled with scorn. "Well, old man Tony, you look to the horses—ugh! this forage's tough as buffalo-horn! But I've tackled it, and won't give in beat though all the red-skins 'twixt this and t'other place—you understand, old man Tony?"

The worthy thus addressed made no reply, but strode a few paces further on, where two horses were daintily nibbling the rich, short grass growing around the little pond, fed by the spring beside which the speaker half reclined. Drawing the slackened girths a few inches higher and slipping the dangling bits between the ready jaws were all the preparations required. Then the man strode back to his former look-out, at the edge of the desert island.

For miles upon every side, the hard, arid desert extended, level nearly as a barn-floor. Here and there might be seen a low ridge of sand or an occasional clump of the many-thorned cacti. But these features were unheeded by the tall man.

Far distant, almost upon the horizon line, was the telltale dust-cloud, now larger, more clearly defined; yet only an unusually keen eye could have distinguished it from the dancing, dazzling refraction of the sun's rays upon the blazing sands, much less have declared that the cloud was made by horsemen, who bore lances.

The watcher knew that the party were heading direct for the desert island; the only water-hole for dozens of miles around. His shaggy brows lowered, a look, dark and forbidding, came over his bronzed features; a look, not of fear, but of hatred the most intense.

"Tis no sweetheart you're watching, that's plain, old man Tony," laughed his comrade, as he came up. "Wonder would those sweet-scented ducks be in quite so much of a hurry if they knew who was waiting for them? You think they're your old friends, Tony?"

The old man's eyes glared like living coals as he turned, first pointing to his mouth, then shaking his short, heavy rifle with an air that could not be mistaken.

"Whew!" whistled the young man, rubbing his curly poll dubiously. "That's your lay-out, is it? You carry the thing high enough, that's sure! If one, there's fifty bucks in that crowd. I like you as well as the next man, but just now I'd rather be true to my name—Jack Rabbit—in other words, run—puckachee."

Tony did not speak, but made a few rapid gestures, which the young man—who had claimed the whimsical name of Jack Rabbit—apparently had no difficulty in comprehending.

"All right, old man Tony, since you put it that way. I'm always lazy after dinner, but since you're determined to get your head broke, I'll see you through."

Squatting side by side, just within cover of the stunted trees, the two men coolly awaited the approach of the enemy, though the long odds might well have caused them uneasiness. A strangely-matched couple were they, resembling each other in only one respect—dauntless courage; many would call it utter recklessness. Yet strong and peculiar ties bound them together.

Anthony Chew was a fair specimen of what the Western "hog-meat and hominy" can produce. Rising six feet, his sturdy frame was a well-shaped mass of bone and muscle strengthened and hardened by long years of wild life—not wild in the one sense of dissipation. Whisky had never dimmed his eye, clouded his brain, nor weakened his muscle, though for nearly half a century he had lived upon or beyond the borders of civilization. At sixty years of age he was just in his prime. His features were good, what could be seen of them through the long, flowing beard, and hair of almost snowy whiteness. But for many a long year a smile had never been seen upon his face, and a dark, stern look, almost forbidding, had become habitual to him.

Jack Rabbit was but little above the average height, though his rounded limbs, his deep chest, thin flanks, and small waist gave token of unusual strength, combined with an activity not incompatible with his name, or *sobriquet*, whichever it might be.

His face was handsome as his figure was comely. Large eyes, lustrous and sparkling as those of a deer; a healthy brown and red complexion; a silky mustache shading his red, arched lips; a shock of curly black hair showing beneath his broad-brimmed, gold-banded sombrero. A light jacket of blue broadcloth, ornamented with gold lace and silver buttons; a silken shirt, richly embroidered and frilled; soft-tanned buck-skin nether garments, meeting hairy leggings above beaded moccasins. The *beau idéal* of a prairie dandy.

His arms in every respect resembled those of the old man. A heavy, single-barreled rifle, muzzle-loading, of course; the nature of this rifle would have required a pack-mule for the transportation of metal cartridges. Each man carried two heavy Colt's revolvers, navy pattern; and in their breasts might have been found extra cylinders, all ready for substitution in case of need.

"They're coming up lively, old man Tony," said Jack Rabbit, after a few minutes of silent watching. "They're not on our trail, so they must have left water in the night. Their animals won't be checked easily when they fairly scent the drink, however bad the copper-skins weaken. We'll have to work lively, or good-by to the trail you've been so anxious about."

Nearer and nearer came the party of savages, until at length the comrades could easily distinguish the riders and their mounts. The mustangs, covered with sweat and dust, bore plain traces of long and hard riding, straggling along in twos and threes, according to their speed or endurance, scenting the life-giving water with distended nostrils. Jack Rabbit had spoken truly. Death alone could check a charge like this.

Nearer and nearer—until Tony uttered a low, hissing sound, and the two rifles were lowered. An instant later came the double reports, sounding like a single one. Through the thin veil of smoke they could note the result of their fire, as they rapidly reloaded.

With the wild, horrible yell that almost invariably accompanies the death-throes of an Indian, the leading brave flung aloft his arms and fell headlong from his horse. His nearest comrade dropped heavily upon his mustang's neck, blood gushing from his parched lips and almost smothering the death-shriek.

With yells of astonishment and terror, the savages plucked sharply at the jaw-breaking mamelukes, and hastily grasped their weapons. Yet, as Jack Rabbit had foreseen, the thirst-maddened animals plunged blindly forward, entirely beyond control of their masters.

With wonderful rapidity the rifles were reloaded and capped, then, once again, the unerring eyes glanced through the double sights, marking two more red-skins for death.

The same instant Jack Rabbit uttered a shrill whistle. A joyous neigh promptly responded, and crashing through the undergrowth, two horses bounded to their masters' sides. Slings his rifle on the cantle, Jack Rabbit leaped into the saddle, crying sharply:

"Mount, old man—mount, or they'll ride over us! Don't throw away your life and mine, too!"

It may well be doubted whether any other appeal would have been heeded, for the demon of vengeance was fully aroused in the old hunter's breast. His eyes glared like living coals, his beard was flecked with froth, and a hoarse, snarling sound came from the depths of his chest. Only the deep, intense love which he felt for his protegee could have drawn him from the feast of blood, even though he knew that longer stay could be little less than certain death.

"Mount, Tony—mount, or I swear I'll run a muck bare handed with the whole caboodle out there! That's the ticket. Give 'em a taste of revolver-soup—hurrah!"

Giving his blood-bay free rein, guiding him only with his knees, Jack Rabbit dashed out into the open ground, discharging shot after shot in rapid succession, sending each leaden pellet home with an unerring certainty that was fairly marvelous. Few men are they who can send bullet after bullet to its flying target from horseback, but Jack Rabbit had found a rare teacher in big Tony Chew, and, as will presently be shown, the wild life they had followed for years had given them plenty of practice.

The deep, snarling sound growing into a hoarse roar, Tony Chew turned his big buck-skin horse directly toward the yelling, confused savages, a revolver in either hand, and would have charged into their midst, only for the prompt interference of Jack Rabbit, who seized the loose rein and bore the madman to one side. As though unconscious of this, Chew plied his revolvers in quick succession, until the dull click told that the cylinders were empty.

The sudden and deadly attack had utterly demoralized the Indians, and when the two horsemen burst out from the motte, they swerved and struggled furiously with their thirst-frenzied animals. But to retreat was beyond their power. And then, as no more shots came from the island, as no more horsemen made their appearance, the humiliating truth forced itself upon their minds.

Then, not until they realized that they had been bearded by two men, they bethought themselves of their weapons, and two or three escopette balls whistled by the prairie riders, dozen arrows hissed through the air; then the horses and riders disappeared, plunging into the motte.

Laughing loudly, Jack Rabbit tossed his head back as a flint-headed arrow tore through the flying curls beside his ear, and still holding the bridle of his comrade's horse he wheeled swiftly around the timber island, just without arrow-shot.

"They know now who's playing with them, old man Tony, and their proud stomachs 'll turn against letting us get off after scaring them so thoroughly. They'll be after us the very moment they can get their ponies away from the water. As though a hop-toad could catch an antelope! You want fun—well, we'll have it, if you'll only promise not to be such a contrary, headstrong—you understand? I don't want to hurt your feelings, but if anybody else 'd act as *you* did, just then, I'd swear he was a thoroughbred fool—so there!"

Chew wiped the froth from his beard, and made a few rapid signs, which were readily interpreted by Jack.

"Good enough! then I'll load up. It's likely we'll need to burn more powder, unless you've got your fill?"

A look of intense hatred passed over the giant's face, and a harsh, guttural sound came from his throat.

"All right; fight it is, then. And not so much fight, either. We can choose our own distance, and if they're fools enough to follow us, we can pick 'em off one by one. Ha! look yonder! Some of the imps are in a hurry to reach their happy hunting-grounds—so! There goes one, by lightning express!" and a reckless laugh parted the young man's lips as he flung forward his rifle and fired at a savage who had just sauntered beyond the friendly cover.

Hard hit, if not killed, the Indian fell back and was quickly drawn under cover. A series of angry yells went up from the motte, and a moment later the two men could see that some movement was about to take place.

"Ready, old man," sharply spoke Jack Rabbit, as he rammed a bullet home and quickly recapped his rifle. "I do believe they're going to make a charge for it. Just keep beyond the first rush, and all's right. They can't follow us far on their waterlogged craft."

First came the loud, lumbering report of the escopettes, or sort of shortened muskets, carrying a heavy ball; and then, with furious yells, the red-skins charged from the island, urging their ponies with voice and heel, holding their bows ready bended. But at the same moment the two riflemen darted away, and the clear, taunting laugh of Jack Rabbit came floating back to the angry ears of the enemy.

With their horses only in a hand-gallop, the adventurers maintained their distance. As the young plainsman had foreseen, the ponies ran heavily, having drank too much water, despite the efforts of their masters to keep them in trim for a chase.

"Old man," abruptly said Jack Rabbit, "seems to me we're acting the parts of cowards, rather than men. The train can't be many miles ahead, and we're leading these brutes direct for it."

As he spoke, Jack Rabbit pointed before him. Deeply imprinted in the sand was the broad, unmistakable trail of a wagon-train; and yet it would have looked oddly enough to northern eyes. The tracks of the wheels were over a foot in width, uneven and irregular, forming a trail that could be followed through the darkest of nights, by the sense of touch alone. The trail led direct from the timber island, where the party had evidently halted. Now, the two men were riding along it, followed by the yelling savages.

Tony Chew made a rapid series of signs, easily interpreted by his young comrade. Their purport was: if left to themselves, now, the Comanches would undoubtedly follow the broad trail and seek revenge for their losses upon the travelers. Tony proposed to draw them so far from the trail that the party would have time to reach their intended camping-grounds, and so be better prepared for what might follow.

"Your head's level, old man," laughed Jack, as he turned in his saddle to select a mark.

Rightly divining his intention, the savages disappeared behind their ponies, hanging by a foot and a hand. The plainsman laughed, recklessly, as his rifle spoke sharply and a horse and rider fell heavily to the ground.

"Go and do likewise, daddy. A Comanche on foot is like a hornet without its sting. Give them a salute and then sheer off to the right. I reckon 'twill make 'em mad enough to leave the big trail."

His last words were drowned by the report of the big scout's rifle, and a horrible death-shriek came to their ears as a dying savage plunged headlong from his seat, caught by the leaden missile before he could entirely cover himself.

"It works—it works!" muttered Jack, exultantly, as he saw the entire party heading direct for them, leaving the wagon-trail behind them rapidly. "They're letting out a fresh link, too. Those little brutes are tough as sole-leather."

The speed of the pursuers was indeed increasing, strange as it may appear. In fact the Comanches had hurried their

ponies away from the water-hole before their thirst was half-quenched, so that instead of being "water-logged," the mustangs, desert born and bred, were gaining strength and courage with every stride. Thus swifter and swifter sped the chase over the blazing desert sands.

Jack Rabbit laughed again as he glanced back. A dozen savages had forged far ahead of their comrades. He believed that the draught of cold water was doing its work. But Tony Chew shook his head slowly, and his nimble fingers told a different story. The silent speech was something like this.

"You see, they've cut us off from the trail. To get back into it, we'd have to run the gantlet. Look again. The main body is pressing along the wagon-trail, leaving these dozen bucks to attend to us."

An evil light filled Jack Rabbit's eyes as he saw now adroitly they had been overreached; but it was too late now to act otherwise. Still, hoping to distance their pursuers at least enough to admit of their regaining the wagon-trail by a detour, the two men urged on their animals at full speed.

With dogged perseverance, the Comanches stuck to the chase, though losing ground at every stride. Still, in a long race, a mustang will run down the best blooded horse that ever wore the pig-skin, and the fugitives had already traversed nearly sixty miles of sandy waste since sunrise.

An uneasy light began to fill the old man's eyes, and his nostrils dilated as he rose in his stirrups and cast a keen, sweeping glance before him. At the same moment a wild yell of exultation burst from the Comanches, and they could be seen to ply their plaited whips with redoubled energy.

"What's in the wind now?" sharply demanded Jack Rabbit.

Tony made no reply, but as they thundered on, he shortened his rein, peering keenly forward. The Comanches, riding two and two, now began to spread out upon either hand. A faint line before the fugitives grew rapidly plainer and more distinct. And then the real danger burst upon them.

A wide, deep barranca yawned before them, its sides and bottom marked by sharp, jagged bowlders. And the exultant savages came yelling on.

CHAPTER II.

A DUEL A LA MORT.

THE two plainsmen sharply drew rein. Before them lay the barranca, a chasm over a hundred feet in depth, the sides precipitous and impracticable, the width far too great for mortal horse to leap across. Behind them came the exultant, screeching savages, flogging their jaded beasts to increased speed, holding their weapons ready for use the instant they should draw within range.

"Those fools think they've got the dead-wood on us now," laughed Jack Rabbit, carelessly. "Wonder if they ever saw men fight before?"

Old man Tony used his fingers rapidly. He said that while there was but little doubt that they two, with their revolvers, would be more than a match for the Comanches' bows and arrows, yet he would rather have more room to maneuver in; that in the *melee* one or both of their horses might be killed or disabled, and to be left afoot in the desert would be equivalent to death. Let Jack Rabbit follow him closely, watch his every motion, and imitate him in every respect.

Turning his big yellow horse to the left, Tony Chew raced swiftly along the edge of the canyon, closely followed by Jack Rabbit, whose rifle was threatening the foremost Indians.

The Comanches were already within long rifle range, and the two parties were steadily drawing nearer to each other, following the lines of an angle which would meet at a point some two miles ahead, if nothing prevented.

As the range gradually lessened, the Comanches, at every motion of the young man's rifle, would duck down behind the bodies of their laboring ponies. But Jack held his fire. He dared not risk wasting a shot now.

Then a harsh, inarticulate cry from the big borderer arrested his attention, and as he interpreted the rapid sign, a reckless smile chased the dark scowl from his face. He saw now what Chew had been working for, and felt that the game lay in their own hands.

With a shrill yell he whirled his blood bay, and swiftly thundered down upon the nearest Comanches, closely followed by the white-haired giant. Taken by surprise, strung out in a long line, the Comanches moved aside as though about to leave the way clear for the two men; but such was not the case.

The movement was simply to combine their forces, and they were quickly formed in two bodies, between which the fugitives must pass or else check their charge.

"Now, old man Tony," said Jack Rabbit, when they were almost within pistol range of the enemy, "I'll keep 'em in play, while you show the way over. Keep in a straight line beyond, so that I won't make a blunder."

Without a moment's hesitation the white-haired giant wheeled his horse and galloped swiftly back toward the barranca, holding the reins tight drawn, glaring keenly ahead.

A wild yell broke from the Comanches at this unexpected movement, and as with one accord they brandished their weapons and urged their ponies forward. Shouting back a

bold defiance, Jack Rabbit leveled his revolver and opened a rapid fusilade upon the charging savages.

Though only one brave fell, badly wounded, the swiftly-recurring shots served to check the Comanches. Sinking from view behind their mustangs' bodies, they separated with the evident intention of cutting off the young plainsman from rejoining his comrade.

A swift glance showed Jack the figure of the big horse and rider cutting through the air like a bird, and he knew that the way was open for his retreat, and none too soon, either. The Comanches were rapidly lessening his slight advantage. Ten seconds later would have been fatal to his hopes.

Despite the imminent peril, the young man's natural recklessness displayed itself in a clear, ringing laugh, as he touched his bay with the spurs, and dashed direct for the canyon, as though intent upon committing suicide.

As yet the chasm was concealed from him, but beyond it he saw the big borderer eagerly motioning him on, and knew that he was heading aright. Upon each side the Comanches were rapidly drawing nearer, and already their arrows began to hurtle through the air, cutting all around the fugitive. For himself he cared little, but in case even a single arrow should strike his horse, then good-by to his hopes. He knew that the leap before him would be a severe test of the blood-bay's powers at best; wounded, 'twould become an impossibility.

He did not attempt to clear the way with his revolver, for he knew that his jaded horse would need all his aid in making the leap. So, with clenched teeth and stilled breath he dashed on—on, until the chasm yawned almost beneath his feet, while the arrows whistled viciously around his form.

With a shrill yell he plunged spurs rowel deep into the steaming sides of the blood-bay, and lifting him up by the reins, he shot through the air like a bird.

An angry yell broke from the Comanches as they saw their anticipated victim dwell for a moment over the frightful depth, then strike fair and lightly upon the other side of the barranca, plunging along for a few yards, then drawing up safe and sound beside the big borderer.

The very moment he felt assured Jack Rabbit knew the exact point at which to take his leap, Tony Chew spurred aside and urged his horse up to the very brink of the chasm, snatching his rifle from the high pommel.

Like a bird Jack Rabbit shot past, the yelling Comanches close upon his heels. The white-haired giant coolly selected his target and fired. Death-stricken, the foremost savage fell headlong to the blood-stained sands.

Again uttering that horrid, indescribable sound, the big borderer dropped his rifle across his thighs, drawing a revolver, and sending bullet after bullet into the confused mass of men and beasts, as the two parties met. Still, despite the fact that another of their number fell disabled, the Comanches seemed bent on forcing a passage, and doubtless would have succeeded had not Jack Rabbit hastened to the assistance of his comrade. Then, under the rapid fusilade, the red-skins hastily retreated until at a reasonably safe distance.

"We've got the dead-wood on 'em this time, old man," laughed Jack Rabbit, as he brushed the mingled dust and perspiration from his brow. "They'll give us a breathing-spell just now, and so, while I'm loading up, you doctor my hump-ribs a bit. 'Twas a young hand sent that—afraid of losing the chance if he waited to pull the arrow to the head—or I'd have got more than a flea-bite."

In truth a feathered shaft was quivering in the young borderer's back, just beneath the left shoulder-blade, received while he was hanging in mid-air above the chasm. With an anxious look Tony hastened to examine the wound, his hands trembling far more than when he was facing the savage war-party. But, as Jack Rabbit had said, the wound was little more than skin deep; the arrow had been sent with little force.

Their next move was to carefully inspect the condition of their horses. To their great satisfaction, neither had been touched by the flying arrows, nor had the long race, ending as it had in an uncommon leap for prairie horses, had any other effect than to jade them a little.

"They're ready for a fifty-mile race this minute," cried the enthusiastic Jack Rabbit, as he caressed his loved bay. "But what 're those imps up to now?"

When the Comanches retreated before the leaden hail-storm, they gathered together as if for consultation, evidently determined to make another attempt to avenge their fellow brethren. When Jack made his remark, they had plainly arrived at some conclusion; nor did they waste time in carrying it out.

Their number had been reduced to eleven. Of these, six remained stationary, though still mounted, directly opposite the point where the borderers had leaped the barranca. The other five, after looking carefully to their bows and arrows, set their horses in motion, speeding toward the barranca, but in a line that would strike it some hundred yards above our friends.

"They know of another crossing!" exclaimed Jack, with an inquiring glance at the white-haired giant.

Chew's nimble fingers swiftly replied: that this point was the only one for miles in either direction narrow enough for mortal horse to cross. By going around, the Comanches could not reach them under twelve hours, at the very least.

"Look! they mean business, sure enough!" cried the young man, as his ready wit divined the plan of the horsemen.

"Here—take the horses back yonder—out of bow-shot; give 'em the sign to stay where put."

As he spoke, Jack Rabbit leaped to the ground and running close to the barranca, flung himself at full length in a slight depression of the sand. Tony Chew obeyed without a sign, trotting rapidly away from the spot.

Stripped to the skin, save for their scanty breech-clouts, laying aside their robes, their lances, everything except their bows and arrows, the five Indians now began their portion of the work. One brave set his mustang in motion, galloping along the edge of the barranca, increasing his speed with every stride. When within short range of the prostrate adventurer, he sunk quickly behind the body of his horse, and then, as he darted swiftly, sent a brace of arrows whistling viciously over the chasm. Close upon his heels came a second brave, then another and another, each delivering their arrows as they swept by, then swooping around in order to regain their starting-point.

Jack Rabbit glanced anxiously over his shoulder, without attempting to return the shots. He saw that the intention was to kill or disable the two horses, as the surest way of securing the pale-faces. But Tony had not been idle, and the feathered shafts all fell short.

Leaving the animals, the giant borderer hastened back and took up his position to the right of his comrade, just as the Comanches were about to make their second charge.

"Pick off their ponies, or they'll keep it up until one of us is pinked, then those other dogs will make a charge for the leap," muttered Jack, as the leading Comanche spurred along.

Crack—crack! In swift succession the two rifles spoke, and held by hands that were well-nigh unerring, the two foremost riders went down in a confused heap with their stricken ponies. The following braves, aghast, veered suddenly aside, uttering yells of rage and dismay.

"Now's our time!" cried Jack Rabbit, his eyes flashing, as he uttered a shrill whistle. "What's the use in fooling when one charge will end it all?"

The well-trained horses promptly obeyed the signal, and mounting, Jack Rabbit rushed at the leap, carrying his blood-bay over the chasm as cleverly as before, then, drawing his faithful revolver, he thundered down upon the astonished savages, who could scarce believe their senses.

The immense stride of the yellow horse quickly carried him alongside the lighter limbed bay, and then, through a cloud of hastily aimed arrows, the comrades met the Comanches hand to hand.

The rapid detonations of the revolvers, the clatter of the long lances, the thud of hoof-strokes upon the sand, the shrill yells answered by the reckless laugh of Jack Rabbit and the deep growl of the white-haired giant, mingled with the death shriek, the cries and groans of the dying.

Truly it was a duel to the death!

CHAPTER III.

THE BUFFALO-HUNTERS.

A CHORUS of truly diabolical sounds filled the air. It seemed as though a score of persons, each with different toned voice, were shrieking aloud in bitter agony, never pausing for breath, even for a moment.

Such sounds coming to the ears of a traveler in that wild and desolate region known as the Llano Estacado—that vast tract of land claimed by no man, yet which is often baptized in blood, whenever the rival tribes of prairie Indians meet within its limits—such sounds would naturally be interpreted as the signals of another dread tragedy. But the rays of the afternoon sun would quickly dissipate such ideas.

A wagon-train was slowly toiling its way across the dry, sandy waste, heading for the now not distant line of broken, rugged rock hills, thinly covered with cedar and other evergreens. A wagon-train, yet not one familiar to northern eyes. The one in question is curious enough to repay a closer inspection.

The train proper was composed of fourteen carts, or technically speaking, *carretas*, each drawn by two yoke of oxen. A description of one, comprises all. The wheels, two in number, are merely rude blocks of wood, cut from the butt of a cottonwood tree, without the slightest attempt at rounding them, other than peeling off the bark, and were from thirty to thirty-six inches in diameter, a foot or more in thickness. In some cases a strip of raw hide had been tacked on as a tire. The wheels, usually nearer square or oval than round, are joined by a stout wooden axle. A long tongue leads out from the axle-tree, a stout bar of wood being lashed to its smaller end. This is again lashed to the horns of the wheel oxen. A deep, square box is secured upon the axle and tongue. When once the clumsy machine is fairly in motion, the noise made by the wooden axles, guiltless of grease, is beyond all description, and has only one equal—a troop of howling monkeys while testing their throats to the utmost.

Besides these primitive carts, there are a number of pack-mules, some heavily loaded, others bearing a woman or two or three children. Each team has a driver. Besides, one can distinguish a number of men, some afoot, others upon horse-back. All in all, the human souls number full two score.

Who are they? The answer is brief. They are the BUFFALO-HUNTERS.

A few words concerning this peculiar people, then for rapid action and brief delays.

For over a century these buffalo-hunters (*ciboleros*) have been a separate and distinct race, the business generally descending from father to son, generation after generation, though occasionally one more enterprising would make a fortune and end his days as a *rico*. These men were to the frontier of Mexico pretty much what the trapper and pioneer have been to the Anglo-American settlements. The outfit of the buffalo-hunter is widely different from that required by his northern prototype. Of fire-arms he knows little and cares less—as a rule. A short, tough bow with a quiver full of keen, steel-headed arrows; a long lance, a stout knife and a lasso. A well-trained horse is essential, and many a ragged, greasy *cibolero* has been seen astride an animal well-nigh worth its weight in gold, when not a *claco* could be found in his pockets.

The buffalo-hunter is also a trader—in fact, this is his main dependence. The Comanches, Apaches, Pawnees, and other tribes know their object in venturing so far beyond the limits of civilization, and, as a general thing, encourage the traders to come among them. Yet, through a wanton love of displaying their power, the savages but too frequently do all the trading themselves, cheating and abusing the adventurers, sometimes ending all disputes by a massacre. Still, these lessons are soon forgotten, and the *ciboleros* risk their lives, their little all, again and again. Sometimes a large company of these traders combine their stock, taking with them their wives and families, until, only for the horrible shrieking carretas, they might be mistaken for a migrating Indian tribe.

The trading stock of the *cibolero* is very limited. Some sacks of coarse bread, which most prairie Indians consider a delicious luxury; a quantity of *pinole* (parched corn, ground and mixed with water and sugar); a few baubles of glass and brass; some coarse, high-colored blankets and cloths, and a few Spanish knives with their painted triangular blades.

Such is—or rather was, for the race is almost extinct—the *cibolero* of New Mexico, and his equipage and following.

A tall, dark bearded man, fine looking, even through the thick covering of tan and dust, was urging his driver to hasten the progress of the train, when a rider spurred to his side and spoke a few hasty words:

"Father, we are not alone. Look—a dust cloud!"

"I know, Rosina; my eyes are open. I saw the sign a mile back, and for that reason I am hurrying up the train to reach the rocks before—"

"There is danger, then?"

"There is always danger when one's eyes are closed. We are in a bad part of the desert. It is here that the Mad Chief, as they call him, rides often. But rest easy. We are strong and well armed. Even if yonder party be his following, there is little to fear. We will clip his wings and rid the desert of a foul scourge. Only—I would rather we were at the rocks, yonder."

Father and daughter rode on side by side in silence, though with many a backward glance. Don Felipe Raymon was a devout believer in signs and omens, and had not forgotten his evil dream of the past night. Only for that dream he would have welcomed that dust-cloud as a token of an advantageous trade.

Though scenting water, the jaded oxen toiled slowly and wearily on with their loads, the clumsy carts creaking in horrible concert with the loud cracking whips and voluble curses of the dark-skinned drivers. The friendly rocks grew nearer, but so did the desert cloud, and ere long Don Raymon realized the utter folly of continuing such a race. To keep on would only expose his fear, and none knew better than he how prone even the most friendly Indians were to take advantage of such a weakness.

He gave the signal to halt, and then for the women and children to keep close to the middle carts, while the men, thoroughly armed, stood around ready either for peaceful trade or warlike blows.

"They're Comanches, senor," respectfully ventured a little grizzled *cibolero*. "You can see their long hair."

The Comanches do not shave any portion of their heads, merely braiding the scalp-lock, allowing the long lock to float freely down their shoulders. Some of them even splice the hair, using that cut from the heads of captives for the purpose.

"Rather them than those cursed Pawnees, under that devil, the Mad Chief, eh, Pepe?" smiled Don Raymon.

"They say he has horns and a forked tail—holy mother, protect us!" muttered Pepe, crossing himself.

The Indian party was now distinctly visible and their number could almost be counted. They came on at a steady gallop, though their animals gave unmistakable signs of a long, arduous journey, for the frequently-applied thongs of cowhide could not quicken their pace in the least.

"Bid the men keep on guard, Pepe," muttered the leader, an anxious light in his eye. "The heretics do not act natural. They seem in deadly earnest."

Contrary to their habitual customs of greeting a party of friends with a display of horsemanship and *fanfarronada*, the Comanches galloped up in silence, the party dividing, one-half passing round the train as if to cut off its further retreat, while the other portion, under lead of a tall, heavily-bearded man, drew rein within short arrow-shot of the wagons.

Don Raymon immediately rode forward a few yards, making a signal of peace, which was responded to by the bearded man, who urged his panting mustang forward.

"You are the chief of this party?" he demanded, in fair enough Spanish, with a keen glance into Raymon's face.

"Yes, senor—and you, if I mistake not, are a countryman of mine?" was the prompt reply.

"No—I am a Comanche chief," fiercely rejoined the renegade. "If I once consorted with dogs and the sons of dogs, I do so no longer, and if you are wise, you will bridle your tongue or it may cause you trouble. Bid your men stand out in full view. Never mind my reasons—I'm not in the most agreeable humor just now, and the less trouble you give us the better it will be for you."

This insolent speech stuck in the Mexican's throat, and it was only by remembering that his dear ones—his wife and children—were so near, that he could choke down his anger. For a moment he was strongly tempted to give the signal for his men to fire, for he saw that his force was fully equal to that of the renegade; but, policy forbade. Even if he were to defeat this party, a single survivor would be enough to bring the entire Comanche tribe down upon him, long before he could escape from the desert.

"There's another one on horseback, who hides his face," sharply added the renegade, pointing to the figure of Rosina, who had covered her face with a corner of her *manga*.

"That is a woman—my daughter."

"Perhaps. Bid her show her face, then," and the renegade pressed forward to where the maiden sat, astride her horse, as is usual with all Mexican women save those of the higher order.

With a sharp, angry cry, a beardless youth of some fifteen summers, pushed his horse before that of Rosina, and threatened the renegade with leveled rifle.

"Back—dare to touch my sister and I'll shoot you like a coyote!" he said, in a low, stern voice.

"Pablo—he will kill you!" cried Rosina, dropping the friendly *manga* and clutching her brother's arm.

The renegade shrunk back from the threatening weapon, but a glow of brutal admiration overspread his rugged features as he caught sight of that almost peerlessly beautiful face.

"I am satisfied, senor," he said, turning quickly toward the frowning *cibolero*, whose hand was resting upon a half-drawn knife, while the other men were pushing forward with scowling looks and muttered threats. "But keep your men at a more respectful distance, and teach this boy better manners. He crows too loud for a young cock."

"He is his father's son, and knows how to avenge an insult," hotly retorted Pablo.

"Peace, my son," said Don Raymon, with a gesture of command. "And now, senor, since I have complied with your request, what is your wish? We are only poor *ciboleros*, come here to hunt buffalo, and to trade with our friends, the Indians. But it is a rule with us to give as much as we receive, whether in peaceful barter or stout blows."

"Yours is a nimble tongue, at least," sneered the renegade. "But enough. Where are the rest of your company?"

"You have seen them all; there are no others."

"Be careful. I know more than you suspect. There are two men belonging to your company not now present. One is a white-haired giant, the other a young man. They ride large horses, one a buck-skin, the other a blood-bay. When and where are they to join you again?"

"I have already said that I know no such persons."

"And lied in saying so. Stop! Touch a weapon or make one false motion, and 'twill be your last act on earth. Look at my braves. They are in a pleasant humor just now. There's blood in their eyes, and a single motion of my hand is enough to make them charge; you can imagine the rest. They are the choicest warriors of the Comanche nation."

"Once more—what do you wish?" impatiently demanded the buffalo-hunter, with difficulty subduing his rising anger.

"That is easy told. Your two friends are our bitter enemies. To-day, as we approached the water-hole—where you halted last night—they fired at us from an ambush, and killed some of my braves. Their horses had been resting; ours were nearly worn out. They fled, like cowards, pursued by a portion of my band. They may escape, their horses are so much fresher; but in any case the blood of the dead must be avenged. Those men must die, though they seek to hide in the center of the earth."

"I know nothing of them. You must settle the matter between yourselves," coolly replied the *cibolero*.

"That answer will not satisfy my braves. They believe that these two men belong to your company, and so do I. They are generous; for when they might easily kill or capture you all, they are satisfied to demand only two bodies as hostages, to be held until you deliver up the real criminals."

"Indeed! And if we refuse?" sneered Raymon.

The renegade uttered a shrill cry. Like magic every bow was bent, an arrow drawn to the head. Another cry caused the weapons to be lowered, almost before the *ciboleros* could realize it at all.

"You see—the answer is plain. There can be no refusal, since a refusal means death. You are helpless. We are able to take far more than what we ask. Be sensible, then, and give up the two hostages."

"If we consent—I say if—which ones would you select?" slowly asked Don Raymon, like one wishing to gain time for thought.

"Those who will insure your keeping the compact. I select these two," and the renegade pointed out Rosina and Pablo. "Give them to us, with your solemn pledge, and all will be well."

"Never—a thousand times never!" screamed the enraged father, as he flashed forth a knife.

The renegade bounded back, causing his horse to rear so as to protect his body, and at the same time repeating his cry. Instantly the signal was answered by the terrible Comanche war-whoop!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAD CHIEF.

THE war-whoop of the Comanches, the defiant shouts of the buffalo-hunters, the shrieks and cries of the terrified women and children, were mingled with the sharp twanging of bow-strings, the ringing crack of two rifles—those in the hands of Don Raymon and his son Pablo. The Comanches came boldly charging down upon the train, confident of an easy victory.

But in an instant there came a sudden and unexpected change.

Loud and clear, prolonged and ringing, high above the mad tumult, came a series of yells from the vicinity of the rock hills; a war-whoop, but with a different cadence from that of the Comanches.

As though there was magic in the sound, the savages clutched their snorting ponies, the drawn bows relaxed, all eyes were instantly turned toward the new actors in this desert drama.

Riding rapidly toward them, having just debouched from behind a rocky spur, was a party of horsemen, arrayed in all the savage panoply of war, gaudy with feathers, plumes and paint, brandishing their long lances, whooping and yelling like demons possessed, as they swayed on their shaggy, fiery ponies, at intervals uttering the wild and peculiar charging cry of the Pawnees.

At their head rode a peculiar figure. He alone of all that band seemed to scorn the aid of tawdry ornaments. A fold of mottled skin around his loins; that was all. His hair hung to his waist, white as the undrifted snow, mingling with a beard of patriarchal length. His face, his body and limbs were all painted a deep black—the color of death. The horse he bestrode was a noble one; coal black, fiery, yet under complete control, for it was ridden without aid of blanket, bridle or halter, guided by the pressure of its master's knees, the swaying of his supple body.

As this strange figure forged to the front a low cry ran through the ranks of the Comanches, a sound almost of terror. A name was mentioned; that of one whose fame was widespread and terrible.

"The MAD CHIEF—the MAD CHIEF!"

The past need not be glanced at here. Enough for the present that this man was an outcast—his hand against all men, even as all hands were raised against him, outside of his own band of daring riders. But especially did he seem to be the foe of all Comanches. His hand had filled their lodges time and again with weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. More than one tried and trusty warrior had secretly left his lodge and people, secretly vowing never to return until he had rid the earth of this terrible scourge. Of them all, not one had returned. Their scalps blackened in the lodge-smoke of the Mad Chief.

All this the Comanches knew, and only for a moment did they hesitate. Intense hatred quickly crushed out the temporary sensation of fear, and uttering their defiant war-cry, they charged boldly down upon the yelling Pawnees.

Their numbers were nearly equal; if anything the Comanches were a few braves the stronger. And with brandished lances, with arrows ready notched to the taut bowstrings, their eyes glittering, their paint-bedaubed faces all aglow with hatred the most intense, the desert rivals rushed on, eager to meet breast to breast in the mad dance of death.

In amaze the buffalo-hunters lowered their weapons and awaited the result of this unexpected interruption. How would it end? For which side should their wishes be given? Ah! that was hard to decide.

They, too, had recognized that dread being, the Mad Chief, and even at this critical moment a thousand wild tales of his horrible cruelty, his relentless ferocity, flashed across their minds. Not only toward his wild rivals of the desert. There were awesome tales told of the presence of many a silken-haired scalp in his lodge—of white captives kept for horrible torture. All this and more was remembered during the brief interval of that headlong charge, and the mad, devilish combat that followed.

Yet the buffalo-hunters were powerless. They could not flee. They could only await the result, holding themselves in readiness to do battle with the victor.

Straight ahead rode the Comanches. Few are the savage warriors who can withstand an equal number of the children of the "Queen of the Desert." Yet the Pawnees did not flinch. Headed by that terrible black and white figure, they urged their ponies on at full speed. Nearer and nearer, until scarce two yards of space of open road divided them, until the arrows began to darken the air, until the spellbound spectators held their breath in awful suspense as they awaited the shock.

But then, like magic, the Pawnees divide, veering sharply to the left and right, swooping around the astonished Comanches as though intent only upon reaching the wagon-train.

All save one—the Mad Chief. Straight ahead he rode, brandishing his ponderous, knotted and scalp-bedecked club, uttering a snarling cry like that of a famished wild beast. Straight on, single-handed, he plunged into the midst of the Comanches, whirling his warrior club around as though a reed—yet a reed that crushed through bone and muscle like magic.

A fitting pair were they—the madman and his mighty horse. Screaming shrilly, his eyes aglow, his gleaming teeth now bloodstained, striking viciously with its iron-like hoofs, trampling the dead and dying into the thirsty sands, overthrowing the weaker ponies as a cougar among coyotes—thus they burst through the Comanches, leaving in their trail a bloody waste of man and beast.

Thus he joined his braves, who had swept around and now rode between the Comanches and the wagon-train. With one hand to his lips, the wild rider uttered a shrill yell—a signal. And then the cunningly-conceived ruse was revealed.

Yelling exultantly, fully fifty mounted braves rode out from behind the rock-point. The trap was sprung. The Comanches were surrounded.

Death seemed inevitable. Their retreat was barred by the blood-stained chief and his braves. There only remained for them to die.

In that moment the brutal renegade showed how he had gained his high position among the proud desert warriors. Pealing forth the shrill war-cry of his adopted people, he bade them follow him. Since die they must, let it be above the bodies of their hated foes—let them gladden the eyes of their god by appearing before him with their hands steeped in blood.

A single, simultaneous cry answered him. Then, as one man, the devoted braves charged down upon the ready Pawnees. A cloud of hissing arrows met them. A number of braves fell; the dying gave forth their last breath in silence; the wounded painfully raised themselves to fire one more shot, to deal one more blow at their destroyers.

The rivals met. A dust-cloud rose and filled the air, almost shutting out the terrific duel, settling over the combatants like a veil.

Through it all the Mad Chief raged, his massive club cleaving a path of bloodshed and death before him until his arm dripped with gore to the very shoulder. A score weapons were aimed at his life, but now, as often before, he seemed to bear a charmed life. The blows fell harmless, were shattered or turned aside by a sweep of his war-club, or else severed only the empty air as the well-trained charger leaped aside. But swift and deadly were his replies. Man and horse went down in death before his resistless might.

A scant half-dozen of the Comanches cut their way through the *melee*, and fled, their usually stout hearts turned to ice by the fear of that terrible enemy. Past the wagon-train, unnoticed, almost, by the buffalo-hunters who were breathlessly watching the death-struggle beyond. Away over the sandy waste, forgetting the perils of that waterless desert, thinking only of fleeing from the dread avenger.

Nor, all absorbed in the death-struggle, did any eyes note the progress of two other riders. These, unlike the fleeing Comanches, were thundering down toward the scene of blood, not away from it.

The end was near. One by one the Comanches had fallen. The renegade, whose stout arm laid more than one of his foes low in the dust, was wounded and faint with loss of blood. Despair had seized upon his heart. Now that death stared him in the face, he found that life was very sweet.

With a last desperate stroke for freedom, he struck one opposing Pawnee from his pony, dexterously avoided a charge of the Mad Chief, and taking advantage of a rift in the struggling mass, urged his mustang on with a hoarse yell, using his blood-dripping knife as a spur.

But it was not written that he should escape. His fate was recorded. The avenger was upon his heels.

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry, a white-bearded, gigantic figure sped after him, mounted upon a mighty yellow steed. The renegade heard that cry, and glanced back with a shudder of fear. His blood-stained, deeply-tanned face turned to a sickly yellow as he saw his pursuer. Though many a long year had passed since their last meeting, he recognized his deadliest enemy. And more—he knew that he himself was known.

Groaning with terror, he urged his jaded, wounded mustang on. But all in vain. The fiat had gone forth. The yellow horse gained rapidly. He knew that he must be overtaken, and rendered desperate, he turned and threatened the white-haired giant with his knife.

Laughing hoarsely, the avenger swept aside the weapon, and clutched the wretch by the throat, lifting him from the saddle and holding him, quivering, at arm's length.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

THE Mad Chief uttered a fierce snarling cry as the renegade eluded him so adroitly, and as soon as he could clear himself from the press, he dashed on after the fugitive. But another was before him. The big borderer overtook, disarmed and captured the prize, and was holding him, quivering, at arm's

length when the Pawnee leader rode up alongside, whirling aloft the huge war-club, intent only upon sacrificing the captive.

But quick as were his actions, those of another were even more rapid. Darting forward at a sharp angle, a bright blood-bay passed between the two men, and a small, brown hand dextrously clutched the already descending club, wresting it from the Mad Chief's hand with a power that made the gore-dripping arm fall nerveless to its owner's side.

"Mind your eye, old man Tony!" came a clear, warning cry. "The serpents have fairly tasted blood, and would as soon strike friend as foe."

Drawing the senseless wretch across his saddle-bow, holding him there with one heavy hand, the big borderer quickly faced the baffled chief, revolver in hand.

There was a truly startling resemblance between the two men so strangely confronted. Of the same size and build, with the same features, the same masses of white hair; there was only the difference in color, in one's being dressed, the other naked. Let the conditions be changed, let Tony Chew assume the garb of the Mad Chief, and even his bosom friend, Jack Rabbit, would have been puzzled to choose between them.

The Mad Chief drew a knife. His braves, watching the different attitudes of the big borderer, flocked to the aid of their idolized leader, with loud yells of angry vengeance. The eyes of big Tony glowed like coals from beneath the heavily contracted brows. He could die, if need be, but while a breath of life remained he would defend his captive.

Not for love. No—far from it. For years he had sought this man; for nearly a quarter of a century he had known no other object in life than to meet this man face to face. There was a heavy account between them. And now when the hour for settlement came, this rabble dared to interpose.

Jack Rabbit realized this peril, and, true to the man who had been all in all to him since childhood, he wheeled back and took up his position beside Tony, just as the Pawnees ranged around them, their weapons uplifted, their eyes fixed upon the face of their leader, only awaiting his signal. It was given; but the braves quietly dropped their threatening attitude, though keeping the cordon close around the two pale faces.

"Who are you that dare come between a chief and his enemy?" haughtily demanded the Pawnee leader.

"We are men who, like you, hate the Comanches," quickly replied Jack Rabbit, speaking like the Mad Chief, in Spanish. "We came here, we fought for you and against the cowardly Comanches. Look! at the girdle of my brother—it hangs thick with scalps of his enemies. Look again. The hair is all long—the scalps of Comanches alone; there are none of the Pawnee cut there."

"It is so—the words of the young white chief sound well in the ears of his red brother. White Hair is a big brave, and the Pawnees are glad to call him their friend and brother. But look—he holds a snake before him, a snake that crept along in the grass and bit at the bare heels of men. His arm is red with blood. I hear the voices of my dead children calling for vengeance. The voices must be obeyed. The blood must be dried up. The white snake is mine. Let white hair give him up, and all will be bright between us, as it should with brethren."

In a cold, stony silence the big borderer listened to this speech. Then, when the Mad Chief paused, he turned to Jack Rabbit and spoke rapidly with his fingers.

"Our ears have drank the words of a mighty chief," said the young plainsman, in a clear, measured tone. "They are words of wisdom, but the cloud is too thick for him to see both sides of the matter. Listen to the words put in my mouth by the fingers of the White Hair."

"Many moons ago—the lifetime of a young brave—there were two men who had been friends and brothers almost from the hour when their eyes first looked on the sun. They had hunted, slept together, fought for each other, and shed blood in each other's cause. But the day came when a woman, fair and lovely as the moonbeams, crossed their trail. Her tongue was soft and musical as the whispering wind toying with the mountain cedars, but it planted black thoughts and bitter hatred in the heart of one of the brothers. He saw that her love was not for him, and he swore revenge. He had it. Like a coward snake, he, with hired braves, stole upon the happy lover in the night. What did he do? Look!"

At these words Tony Chew flung back his long hair.

His ears had been cropped close to his head. He opened his mouth. The tongue had been cut or torn out, almost by its roots!

The Pawnees interchanged quick glances, and drew nearer. Not all of them could understand the liquid Spanish, but they could not mistake the meaning of those signs.

"You see," continued Jack Rabbit, his voice growing cold and metallic, "this was the revenge of the false brother; but not all. He believed that he had killed his enemy, and fled, fearing the revenge of man. But with him he carried the moon-eyed woman. The wronged man recovered. He learned that his false brother had joined the snakes, and become a Comanche. From that day he took the trail of blood. Scores of Comanches gave up their lives, when they met him. But never once did he meet the snake who had bitten his heel—never until now!"

"Look! yonder are the brothers—the true and the false, White Hair and the Comanche snake. Do you wonder that he refuses to give up his prey?"

"And now—see! I am White Hair's brother. We are only two—you are many; but this captive belongs to us, and if you want him, you must first kill us."

With ready cocked revolvers, the strangely-matched comrades faced the Pawnee war-party.

"No—we will not fight you. The captive belongs by right to White Hair. Only—I ask it as a favor—let not the white snake live to boast of his having shed the blood of men," quickly responded the Pawnee leader.

The big borderer laughed aloud—a horrible, indescribable sound. As the savages observed the look of intense, relentless hatred that overspread his face and shone forth from his eyes, they were satisfied that their utmost wishes would be carried out. Little fear of his letting the renegade escape.

This matter settled, the Mad Chief rode at the head of his braves up to the wagon-train, paying little attention to the half-defiant attitude of the buffalo-hunters, who had, until now, watched the tragic scene with eyes that never for an instant wandered, forgetting all else in the one wild, thrilling death-duel.

The Mad Chief, now as quiet, cool and composed as the youngest of his braves, quickly divined that Don Raymon was the leader of the train, and was soon talking with him upon a friendly footing, questioning the cibolero as to his goods, his desires for a trade, and the like.

Meanwhile Tony Chew and Jack Rabbit had drawn aside, the big borderer having securely bound his captive. The comrades were conversing in low, guarded tones on one side, by the dumb alphabet on the other.

A few words will explain what had occurred, prior to their sudden appearance at the train. In the headlong charge, in the confused hand-to-hand struggle that followed the leap across the barranca, the reckless daring and superior weapons of the pale-faces quickly insured their victory. Demoralized by the rapid fire from the revolvers, terror-stricken by the fall of so many of their comrades, the few survivors broke and fled. But they were not to escape so easily. Living only for vengeance, the big borderer was not satisfied with his long draught of blood. Urging on his big horse, he followed in hot pursuit. Though not entirely sharing his comrade's feelings, Jack Rabbit was in no wise backward, and half an hour later but two of the Comanches were living. Whether these would have escaped, may be doubted—their ponies were utterly exhausted—had not the sound of distant fire-arms caught the ears of the plainsmen. The direction told them all. Beyond a doubt the wagon-train, in whose fate one at least of the party had such a powerful interest, had been attacked by the savages. A single interchange of glances was all; then they headed toward the distant rock hills, urging on their jaded steeds, little recking of the danger into which they might be running.

The comrades parted, Tony Chew leading his captive, cowed and trembling, tied to his horse's tail. Jack Rabbit watched him for a few moments, until he neared the rocky point, then turned as though to enter the half-corral formed by the wagons, where a piercing shriek startled him.

His first idea was that another tragedy was at hand—that the first blow had been dealt of a frightful massacre. But the Pawnees were drawn up at a little distance from the carretas, as though awaiting orders. Pressing forward, he soon realized what had occurred.

A rather fleshy, yet still handsome woman, was clinging round the neck of Don Raymon, shrieking aloud for her children. He heard the cibolero call the woman wife.

The Mad Chief stood by, cold and unmoved. The women and children began to flock forth from the carts, and to join their cries with those of the bereaved mother. Don Raymon seemed quite distracted. He called aloud the names of Pablo and Rosina; but echo alone answered.

With a scornful grunt, the Mad Chief strode beyond the trampled space surrounding the clumsy cart, and bent his eyes to the ground. Don Raymon hastened after him, leaving his now swooning wife to the care of the women.

A low cry broke from the father's lips as the chief pointed out several tracks. Among them he recognized those of the horses ridden by his two children. But the others?

"Comanche dogs—they ran away from men, and stole my brother's children. See—it is written here," the chief quietly explained.

The buffalo-hunter stared at the deeply-imprinted tracks with dimmed eyes and swimming brain. He could not understand how it had all occurred, how the brother and sister—Pablo, such a brave, stout lad—could have been captured and carried off without any one of the party hearing an alarm. Yet he could not dispute the evidence.

"My brother is sick, now," said the Mad Chief, in a strangely gentle voice. "Let him go back to his people and get well. My braves are keen and bold. They will take the trail of these cowardly snakes and follow it to the end. They will not return without as many scalps, and will bring back the children of my brother. See—I swear it, by the Great Spirit of the Wolf-children."

Something told the buffalo-hunter that he could trust him.

The chief did not suffer grass to grow under his feet. He selected a dozen of his best warriors and gave them their instructions within hearing of the bereaved father and mother. They were to rescue the young couple at any and all hazards. Without a word they took up the trail at a gallop.

It had already been agreed that the train should keep on around the rock point to the Pawnee camp, where they could trade or hunt at their ease. And though the red sun was setting, they took up their slow march, leaving the scene of bloodshed and death to the gathering vultures and coyotes.

The twilight deepened into night as the cavalcade rounded the spur; and then a simultaneous cry of wonder broke from the lips of both red and white.

A broad, spreading glow fell upon the sandy waste, and lighted up the many-shaped crags. High up the range blazed and crackled a huge bonfire, streaming up around a tall rock. Then came a shrill, piercing scream, followed by another and another. And as the awe-stricken spectators moved on, they could distinguish a dark form—a human figure writhing in horrible agony upon the rock, striving to burst the bonds that held it to the torture. This, and a tall, white-haired man eagerly feeding the flames, dancing around the funeral-pyre in fiendish glee.

CHAPTER VI.

THE KING OF THE DESERT.

ROSINA RAYMON listened with intense interest to the sharp interchange of words between her father and the renegade. There was something in the evil gaze of the white Indian that almost fascinated her—only, with a feeling of utter abhorrence, rather than fear. She wondered that this man dare address such words to her father, who was proud and stately far beyond his humble profession. And, too, her cheek flushed brightly as she thought of another—were his ears open to the brutal words?

Then came the wild yell of the renegade, the charging cry of his braves, the defiant shouts of the buffalo-hunters, the cracking of fire-arms and sharp twanging of bow-strings.

Of the next few moments, Rosina had but a faint, confused remembrance. She knew that her horse, ever fiery and strong-willed, suddenly became unmanageable, and with a powerful jerk that snapped the bridle-reins, he darted away over the desert with the speed of the wind, utterly beyond its rider's control.

Two of the Comanche braves immediately parted from their comrades and urged their ponies after the flying mustang. If they heard the warning cry that greeted the abrupt appearance of the Mad Chief and his band of Pawnees, it was unheeded. Possibly they preferred less desperate game.

Yet it would have been quite as well had they returned to share the fate of their brethren.

Only one eye among all the train observed the sudden bolting of Rosina's horse. The tumult and excitement of the Comanches' charge deadened her little cry, and the thud of her mustang's hoofs was lost amid the rest.

That eye belonged—not to a lover, but to Pablo Raymon. With warning shout, he spurred after the trio—his idolized sister and the two Comanches—loading his rifle as he rode. Only a boy in years—scarce seventeen, two years younger than Rosina—Pablo had been trained in a hardy school. He had first drawn the breath of life near the center of a vast plain, surrounded by the carcasses of slaughtered buffalo. His cradle had been the rough-jolting carretas, his lullaby the cracking of rifles, the twanging of bowstrings. If ever there was one, he was a born cibolero.

It was without a single thought of personal peril then that he pursued the Comanches, nor did he even cast back a single glance to see whether his warning cry had been heeded, whether any of his friends were following his lead. And then, when the company of buffalo-hunters were eagerly watching the movements of the rival bands, the four figures disappeared behind a long sand-hill.

Rosina vainly sought to check the mad flight of her horse, but the fragments of the defective reins were dangling beyond her reach, the mustang's neck was stretched out like that of a race-horse. In vain did she speak to him. Usually so obedient, so prompt to answer her slightest word or gesture, the creature seemed suddenly to have gone mad.

She glanced back over her shoulder. A little cry broke from her lips. Upon the crest of the sand-hill, whose southern slope she was just descending, two savage figures were just coming into view. The floating hair, the long lances with their scalp-decorated shafts, the nearly nude forms, all these spoke but too plainly. Realizing to the full the peril that threatened her, Rosina no longer sought to check her horse, but patted his steaming neck and urged him on. Better be lost in the desert, better death by starvation and thirst than to fall alive into these hands.

She knew now the cause of her mustang's strange actions. Rankling deep in his hip quivered a feathered shaft, spurring him on, driving him mad with pain. With a strange sinking at her heart she watched the dark blood trickling down the well-shaped leg, leaving a red trail behind them. It was more than should have come from such a wound, unless an important artery had been divided by the cruel barb. If such had been the case, how was it all to end? She shuddered at the thought.

Glancing back she saw that the two savages were further away than at first. Dimly, through the veil of dust, she made out a third horseman, and a wild leaping of her heart told the thought that found birth there. But how often does romance have to hide its diminished head before sober prose!

"He may come up in time to rescue me," she murmured, half-unconsciously. "Or they may give over the chase as nopeless, unless—" and she shuddered again as she glanced back at the rankling arrow and the red stain.

How long would the mustang's strength last under that deadly drain? Already she began to feel—or was it fancy?—that his stride was growing less strong and powerful. Even his stout spirit must give way some time. But would it endure long enough to save its mistress's life?

The sun was sinking in the west, red and glowing. A low bank of clouds was rising in the south. She knew that the night would be dark and starless. If only the mustang could hold out until then—for one short hour more!

An hour—a lifetime!

Slowly but surely the Comanches are gaining upon the fugitive. Jaded though their ponies are, they are able to keep pace with the enfeebled steed. Only for the telltale trail of blood, the savages would have abandoned the pursuit before now. But their wild training teaches them that no horse can live long under such a telling strain. They know that the prize must drop into their hands, ere long.

Strange as it may appear, the Comanches were unaware of the fact that a pursuer was at their heels. Upon the soft sand the fall of hoofs was deadened, and only the sound of their own progress was audible. And so eager were they for the rare morsel before them, that not a single backward glance had been thought of. But the time was at hand when their eyes should be opened.

Pablo Raymon pressed the pursuit with all the ardor of youth, but unfortunately for him he was mounted upon a mustang formed more for its endurance and its thorough training for buffalo-running than for speed. For a time he barely held his own with the Comanches, but then, as mile after mile was traversed in that triple race, the steel muscles of his "buffalo pongo" began to tell, and inch by inch, foot by foot, he gained upon the enemy, until, in the darkening twilight, he could almost count the gaudy feathers in the Comanches' hair. His trusty rifle was lying across his thighs, ready for use. His bow was ready strung; a couple of arrows were lying along the saddle, beneath his thigh, the notched ends convenient to his hand.

The long chase had given his young blood time to cool while it rendered his determination even more fixed. The odds were long ones for a mere boy to encounter, yet he felt no fear as to the result; he would not have been Felipe Raymon's son else.

The red globe of fire sunk beneath the horizon. Clearly outlined against the crimson sky, the Comanches presented a perfect target, and feeling within distance, no longer dreading that the brightness of the sunset would render his aim uncertain, Pablo dropped the bridle-reins and raised his short, heavy rifle.

His well-trained mustang perfectly understood the movement, and instantly slackening its pace, dropped into a low, peculiar run, almost brushing the deep sand with its shaggy belly. From its back, just then, an aim could be secured almost as certainly as from a gently-sailing balloon.

Sharp and clear rung out the rifle-shot, and bursting through the flame-tinged smoke, Pablo saw that the aim had not been erring. With the shrill, unearthly death-shriek of his race, the rearmost Comanche flung aloft his arms and fell headlong from his mustang's back, tearing and biting the hot sand in his last agonized throes.

A cry of wondering alarm broke from the survivor's lips. The awakening had been so sudden and unexpected. It seemed as though the armed horseman had sprung up from the very earth. And a superstitious terror for the moment totally unnerved him.

But then, as Pablo, with a clear, ringing shout, urged his pony forward, fitting an arrow to the taut sinews, self-preservation conquered superstition, and the Comanche hastily prepared his bow.

But the momentary delay had been fatal. With a prolonged echo, the cibolero's bow-string twanged twice in rapid succession, and, literally spitted upon the feathered shafts, the Comanche sunk upon his pony's neck, thundering away over the desert, a dead man, followed by the other mustang, snorting and whickering with alarm.

Pablo had no further thought of them. He only saw his sister, only a few hundred yards beyond. Even in the delirious excitement of his victory, the youth could but wonder at the strangely unsteady movements of the once matchless mustang. The race had been a long and hard one, yet surely it could not have so completely exhausted—Ha!

With one last struggle, the noble creature darted forward for a hundred yards or more, then fell in a heap, dead. The blood burst from its mouth and nostrils. Its race was run.

Anticipating the end of this spasmodic burst, Rosina freed her feet from the stirrups and alighted clear of the dying animal. Just then an encouraging shout came to her ears, and with a yearning cry, she turned, with outstretched arms. The next moment Pablo clasped her to his breast, covering her flushed cheeks with tender kisses, little dreaming what caused that burning blush.

Pablo was very dear to his sister's heart; but his was not the face she expected, and for a moment her heart grew sick within her as she asked what of their friends.

"You know as much as I, little one," laughed Pablo, with youth's lightheartedness. "I thought only of my runaway sister, and did not stop to say good-by to the rest. But be at ease. Our father is there, and he has twenty men, who are equal to twice their number of these naked heathen, not to speak of the slaves, who will fight well, under his eye."

"But he—he may have got hurt," faltered Rosina.

"Holy Mother, deny it!" said Pablo, fervently. "Come, sister, don't borrow trouble; we have our hands full, as it is."

In good truth, their situation was anything but comfortable or pleasant. Far from friends, upon the desert, many miles from any recognized trail, one of them dismounted, the night upon them, and a wind-storm coming on.

Only for this last, the enigma would be easily solved. ▲

slightly uncomfortable night would be all. Then, when the light of day once more spread over the desert, a far less experienced eye than that of the young cibolero would find no difficulty in following back the deeply imprinted spoor of the triple race. But the black, rapidly spreading cloud-bank in the south spoke of such a storm—a furious burst of wind such as changes the entire topography of the desert over which it sweeps, leveling sand-hills only to raise another where, but an hour before, lay long, deep hollows. Slight traces of trail would be left when that storm subsided.

"You think there is danger, then?" asked Rosina, quick to notice the change in her brother's tone.

"Nothing very serious, I dare say. As you see, a storm is coming up, the stars will be hidden, so that we will have to use our judgment in laying our course. But come; they will be anxious about us, if we are much longer away."

Rosina, after a sorrowful word and parting caress for the dead mustang who had given its life to preserve hers, lightly mounted Pablo's pongo, and they took up their weary march over the rapidly cooling sands, the young buffalo-hunter walking beside Rosina's bridle-rein. He had carefully laid their course, by the last gleam of day, and sought to keep from straying by stooping and feeling for the deeply imprinted trail at every few rods.

For a time this answered. Then the wind began to blow strongly from the south. Pablo laughed shortly as the keen blast struck them. The dreaded enemy might be made a servant, a guide.

"See! what we feared may be a blessing, in disguise," he cried, exultantly. "The wind comes from the south; good! Then we have only to keep it on our right shoulder. We will be with our friends before day-dawn, after all, little one."

The words cheered Rosina, and though the high wind, roaring over that vast, treeless waste, bore upon its wings clouds of sharp, stinging particles of sand, the journey was resumed with far more cheerfulness than before.

Their progress was slow and toilsome. The darkness was intense. Though so close together, neither of the young people could distinguish the other form. The wind was fierce and hard to bear up against, growing cold and colder every moment, until the lightly clad Rosina shivered and trembled in the saddle, fearing to speak lest Pablo should discover what she was suffering. The exertion of walking kept him from feeling the cold. Besides, he was partially protected by the mustang's body.

Hour after hour they plodded on. A cruel, choking thirst now assailed them, caused by the sand-burdened air. Their throats were parched, their lips cracked and bleeding. Each minute their torture increased. Yet not a murmur parted their lips. Trained in a stern school, they were seldom guilty of idle complaining.

Hour after hour of that weary, exhausting toil, only endurable because they anticipated soon discovering the campfires of the buffalo-hunters. Ah! had they only known! Had those black clouds only parted enough to give a glimpse of the bright stars—one gleam would have sufficed for the young desert-born.

He would have realized then, how treacherous and fickle was their guide, how uncertain their dependence on the wind. Gradually, imperceptibly the wind had veered around until now it blew almost directly from the east. And so, still keeping the storm bearing upon their right shoulders, the wanderers were now heading nearly due north, straying further and further from the right track. Well enough that they did not realize this, else, despite their stout hearts, they might well have given way—and laid down in the desert, to die.

Still on they plodded through the black night, Rosina almost senseless from cold. For hours neither had spoken. The storm still raged with unabating force. All at once the mustang grew uneasy and restless. In vain Pablo sought to quiet him. Then, with one wild snort, the animal jerked its head loose, and whickering shrilly, was swallowed up in the intense darkness.

For a moment Pablo stood as though petrified; then, with a loud cry of terror, he sprang forward, running swiftly for a few moments. Then he stopped, bewildered, confused. He bent his ear; all was still, save the dull roaring of the tempest. Whither had his horse fled? Not a sound came to guide him. And the cold, sickening terror pressed down upon his heart.

It seemed the work of some evil spirit, this sudden disappearance. Where should he look, which way turn? He felt so helpless in that black night. The intense darkness, this gloom that could almost be felt, weighed him down. And thus, helpless he stood for several minutes.

Ha! that sound! Was it a cry? Fully aroused, Pablo raised his voice and shouted aloud. Faint and feeble the words came. It was the voice of Rosina. Leaping forward he clasped her to his breast, as she feebly arose from the sand. Half-frozen, she had fallen from the saddle.

A moment later there came a shrill, joyous neigh, followed by the rapid beat of a horse's hoofs, then the whimpering mustang thrust its cold, dripping muzzle against Pablo's cheek.

A cry of joy broke from the young man's lips as he realized the truth. The sagacious brute had scented the presence of water; even while they were unconsciously skirting a desert island, and when the keen blast bore the delicious scent fairly to his nostrils, mad thirst conquered all discipline. But now, its thirst appeased, the faithful creature returned to its allegiance.

Five minutes later brother and sister were riding in the grateful shelter of the wooded island, their thirst appeased, a delicious languor stealing over them.

They started to their feet in terror. The mustang snorted loudly, then crouched down, quivering in every limb.

Through the night, echoing even above the wild howling of the tempest, came a terrible yet strangely musical note—the cry of the jaguar—that dread king of the desert!

Then, with an energy born of their peril, Pablo gathered a handful of leaves and used his flint and steel. The tinder caught; the leaves were ignited and carefully fed until the larger twigs blazed brightly, slowly but surely igniting the heavy sticks of wood.

Carefully looking to his rifle, Pablo crouched down before Rosina, the mustang cowering close beside them. The roar was no longer heard. Instead, came a deep, not unmusical moaning or purring sound. Slowly their eyes move round in a circle. Their strained hearing can just distinguish the velvet tread of the tiger as he circles around the prey he has scented.

Then even this sound ceases. From beyond the circle of light, beneath a scrubby bush, gleam two phosphorescent globes of fire. The tiger is glaring out upon its victims.

Pablo slowly levels his rifle. Yet he hesitates to fire. To miss means death, sudden and terrible.

CHAPTER VII.

A VISION OF BEAUTY.

THE day dawned bright and peaceful, the skies were clear and cloudless. There was nothing to remind one of the wild storm of only a few hours before.

The morning sun shone upon a peculiar scene. To the north and west uprose the wild rugged foothills of that vast chain, the Rocky Mountains. Upon the east and south stretched the broad sandy waste, now less even and monotonous than before, since the fierce howling blast had raised the surface in many a curving sand-hill, had hollowed out many a miniature valley in order to form the winding, intricate ridges of glistening sand.

At the base of these foothills now rest the carretas of the buffalo-hunters, and their wild guard, the Mad Chief's Pawnees. A minute description of the spot is necessary to a perfect understanding of what is to follow.

Take a profile view of a statuette—Byron's for instance. Lay it down, with the nose pointing north, the shoulders toward the east. Build a towering wall of almost perpendicular rocks around the skull, the face, down to the neck. Then let them branch off irregularly, leaving the shoulder of the statuette to spread out for the desert. Draw a short, crooked line from the point where the nose ends. That line cuts through the bold rock-walls, running in a zigzag course for a few hundred yards, there ending abruptly; a "pocket." Along its high sides are scores of cracks and crevices, affording notable hiding-places, as well as vantage-points from where a sturdy, well-armed man might hold an army at defiance until hunger and thirst overpowered him.

Though an unalarmed inmate might be long ignorant of the fact, escape from the circular valley was impossible save by this one avenue—the opening represented by the neck of the statuette. In this circular valley, or basin, the carts of the buffalo-hunters were drawn up, their fires built, their skin tents pitched. At the deck of the statuette were stationed the Pawnees. To pass them without permission would be an impossibility.

It may seem strange that the buffalo-hunters, bold, experienced men as they undoubtedly were, should allow themselves to be placed in a trap like this, where they were entirely at the mercy of an ally proverbially treacherous; yet the explanation is simple. The journey was finished in the darkness, when the fierce howling of the tempest was at its worst. Guided by the savages, they occupied the position indicated without the faintest suspicion.

Jack Rabbit and his comrade, Tony Chew, were standing side by side, half-way between the two camps. The features of the big borderer were quiet and composed. Not a trace remained of the deadly passions that had so lately possessed him. With its accomplishment all thought of the horrible vengeance had died away.

The friends were conversing earnestly, the one with his fingers, Jack Rabbit in low, guarded tones.

"No, I don't like it, old man Tony. It may be O. K., but it smells pesky fishy, anyhow. There's a sulky, vicious devil in the old man's eyes that means mischief. He knows that there's a rich haul in those carts, and he means to have it, on pretty much his own terms, too."

"You may be right," signed Chew. "I like him no better than you. But, to me it seemed as though there was more than mere covetousness in his eyes, though he is cunning enough to hide his thoughts, too."

"Now, daddy," abruptly said Jack Rabbit, after a brief pause, "don't you think I've sailed long enough under secret orders? When we took up this trail, you told me that more than life depended upon our search. Yonder is the train; now tell me what interest I can have in those people? What are they to me or I to them?"

"A little longer—the time is not ripe yet. Only—remember this. If you see their lives in danger, risk your own to do them service, as I shall. Perhaps I am wrong—perhaps it is a false trail, though I have followed it for years. But I tell you—*Hut!*"

The dumb speech was abruptly checked as a quick footfall met their ears, and turning, the comrades beheld the stately, white-haired figure of the Mad Chief.

"A peaceful scene, gentlemen," he said, in a pleasant tone, speaking remarkably pure Spanish for one who claimed to be an Indian. "Quite a contrast to our first meeting."

"Yes—peaceful enough," replied Jack, abruptly. "Secure too. No one can enter this basin without your consent—nor leave it, for that matter."

The Mad Chief looked at him with a strange expression in his eyes; but the young man fairly conquered in the duel of eyes. Then, in the same tone, the chief added:

"You brought no meat with you. I came to ask you to be my guest. There are some little matters I wish to ask your advice upon; our plan for entertaining our friends, yonder, in particular."

A slight gesture from Chew decided Jack Rabbit, and he promptly accepted the invitation. Together they passed over to the Pawnee camp, passing close beside two prostrate figures, securely bound to a couple of bowlders.

A quick glance passed between the two men. The captives' garb was that of the Comanches, yet they felt assured that one, at least, of the number had not been among those who fought by the wagon-train.

"They are snakes, brought in by some of my young men this morning," coldly observed the Mad Chief.

"The youngest is one of those who escaped at the barranca," mutely said the big borderer. "He deserves a better fate than awaits him, here."

"Wait—I have a plan," signed Jack Rabbit.

The chief saw these rapid signals, but evidently could not read their meaning. Nor did he allude to them in any way, but led his guests into the tall, roomy lodge. A few sharp words broke from his lips, and then a slight, graceful figure brushed past the pale-faces and left the lodge. Yet, rapid as was the action, the keen eyes of the young hunter saw enough to send his blood coursing rapidly through his veins. It was as though an angel of light had flitted before his eager gaze.

A plentiful supply of meat was smoking upon a large wooden platter. The trio squatted around this, and ate as only men in the best of health can eat. Yet Jack Rabbit cast more than one curious glance toward the lodge door. He was thinking far more of the young woman—even in that brief glance he had seen that she was more than ordinarily beautiful—than of the words of the chieftain.

It would be tiresome to record his long, somewhat prosy speech; the substance must suffice.

He declared that it was not often that he met so many dear friends at one time, but since he had, they must not part company until he had shown them how very dear they were to his heart. For three days, all should be joy and festivity; after that, they could talk of business. The Pawnee braves would exhibit some of their national sports, and then would be glad to watch the pale-faces display their accomplishments.

During this monologue, Jack Rabbit, using the one hand that was hidden from the keen eyes of the black chief, formed these words in the sign language:

"You must help me save the Comanche chief—reasons afterward; they are important. You can leave in a few moments. I'll keep him here until all is ready. Manage to cut the lad's bonds; tell him to wait for the signal—he will understand your signs. Then come for me. I'll tell you the rest then."

Tony Chew mutely signified his readiness to obey. Though so much older than Jack, the young man was generally the leader. Then he arose and left the lodge, trusting to Jack to satisfy the chief.

His keen eye saw that the prisoners were left alone. The Pawnees were generally busied with gorging themselves. Tony believed that he could effect the release unnoticed. Gliding along, he suddenly dropped down behind a point of rocks. Then, gliding stealthily over the ground, keeping well covered, he finally succeeded in reaching the bowlder to which the young chief was bound. A quick sign of amity, then his keen knife noiselessly severed the rawhide thongs, only leaving one intact, sufficient to keep the rest in place. This done, he signed for the chief to wait patiently for his signal, at the same time slipping the knife beneath his body, in easy reach of his hand.

Then, satisfied that his actions had been unobserved, Tony stole away until at a safe distance, after which he arose and returned to the lodge, just in time to hear Jack Rabbit say:

"You have my promise to join in the sports, only we must have a little time to practice first. You can come or send some of your braves out to take notes, if you wish."

The black chief's face lightened at these words, and he quickly agreed. His evident reluctance to letting the two men pass beyond his lines strengthened Jack's suspicions that evil was in his mind, that he meant bitter mischief to the buffalo-hunters.

"Come, pard," he added aloud, "I've promised to show them some of our tricks in the saddle, and as it wouldn't do for us to make a botch of it, we'd better practice a little. We'll get our horses and go outside."

These words were purposely spoken in English, as though not meant for the Mad Chief, but from beneath the long eyelashes that fringed his lids, Jack saw a quick, satisfied smile steal over the chief's face. The bait was swallowed. Whatever suspicions he might have had were now lulled.

While saddling and bridling their animals, now thoroughly

rested from their hard day's work, Jack unfolded the rest of his plan.

"You will go first. Stop close to the young chief. Sign to him that the horse is for him. When he seizes it, do you fall as if knocked down. Leave the rest to me."

"But the horse?" signed Tony, with a dubious look.

"I'll bring it back—and you know mine is the only four-legged animal that can do it. I mean to recapture the red-skin. Never mind why; here comes that old brute."

The Mad Chief came up and said that he himself would ride out with them. Jack Rabbit quietly replied that he would wait till his brother's horse was ready. Tony Chew, as though not hearing the speech, led his big horse along until close beside the captive Comanches, then paused as though to learn why Jack was dallying; and as he glanced back he made several hasty signs to the Comanche.

Quick as thought the last cord was severed, and the young chief darted forward like an arrow fresh from the bow, snatching the reins from Tony's hand and leaping into the saddle. As he dashed away with a wild, ringing yell of exultation, the big borderer fell to the ground in a heap, as though stricken senseless.

A yell of angry warning burst from the Mad Chief's lips, but before any of the Pawnees could interfere, the Comanche had passed the cordon of lodges, and was thundering away over the desert, to all seeming free.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TIGER-HUNTER.

STILL brighter glowed those cruel eyes. Low and soft, yet more terrible than would have been an angry scream, because more treacherous, came the musical purring of the huge cat.

The young buffalo-hunter glanced through the double sights, aiming between the twin stars; but he hesitated to touch the trigger. To fire and miss, or only wound the beast, would be fatal. That instant its leap would be made, and little could their puny strength avail against the desert king.

Then the tiger's head flattened close to the ground, and the loud purr deepened to a deadly, menacing snarl. Another instant and its unerring leap would be made.

His finger was already touching the trigger, when a dark figure suddenly alighted before Pablo, as though it had dropped from the leaves above. He started back with a little cry of superstitious wonder. At the same instant the snarl of the tiger rose to a wild yell, and its long, lithe body shot through the air direct for the spot where the strange figure now stood guarding Rosina.

Had he flinched, as might easily have been forgiven him, the maiden would have fallen the first victim to those sharp claws and gleaming teeth. But, sturdy and firm as though a statue of bronze, the new-comer received the shock. There was a dull, peculiar thud, then, as though rebounding from a stone wall, the tiger fell heavily back, a dozen feet distant. And then, as if impelled by the same power, the dark figure sprang upon the snarling animal, and a confused struggle ensued, through which could be seen the rapid flashing of a blood-dripping blade.

Confused, bewildered, the young cibolero watched the terrible death-struggle without once offering to interfere. The abrupt appearance of this man, who had so boldly taken upon himself the struggle with the desert scourge, for the instant rendered the youth powerless, so great was his surprise, and before the first shock had died away the fight was over. With a shrill, gurgling scream, the tiger rolled over, dead, the long blade passing entirely through its heart.

Was it the echo of that shrill, venomous scream soaring high above the mad howling of the tempest?

The stranger sprang to his feet with a sharp cry, still clutching the faithful weapon that had disposed of one fierce antagonist. The firelight gleamed redly upon his face. Blood, either from the his own or the tiger's veins, possibly both, freely moistened the lithe, half-nude figure. Yet he did not flinch, did not seek to retreat, but stood above the still quivering carcass, the model of a wild, fearless gladiator.

Another cry, louder, sharper than before, accompanied by the swishing and crackling of undergrowth. Then a beautiful, though terrible brute leaped out into the little glade. A counterpart of the first tiger, this one was evidently seeking its mate, aroused by that last terrible cry.

As though bewildered by the bright glare of the fire, the tiger crouched upon the ground, its head flattened, its teeth shining through the parted red lips, its long tail nervously sweeping the ground as its yellow eyes passed from one to the other of those silent figures, finally resting upon the convulsed shape of its mate, lying at the dark man's feet.

Its instinct seemed to single out the slayer, and the lithe form flattened still nearer the earth, every nerve and muscle straining for the avenging leap.

The leap was made, but only through the spasmodic relaxation of the strained sinews. Sharp and spiteful rung out the report of Pablo's rifle, and the leaden missile crashed through the tiger's brain.

Springing lightly aside, the stranger dealt the body a deadly stroke as it passed, the keen blade severing skin, flesh and bones with terrible effect. Quivering, yet senseless to all

pain, the carcass fell into the fire, scattering the brands in every direction.

"It is needless," quietly uttered the stranger, as Pablo sprung before Rosina with drawn knife. "The brute is dead, twice over."

"We owe you our lives, señor—"

"Look again, master," was the interruption, in a quiet, even tone. "I am only a *manzo*—a poor Indian, without either name or people. 'Lazy dog' sounds better than 'señor' when we are spoken to."

"You are our friends, since you risked your life in our defense," quickly interposed Rosina.

"Thanks for the kind words, lady; but you, too, mistake. I acted without thinking of you. I would have assisted my worst enemy against these devils. That is all I live for now. Day and night I hunt them, and shall, until I die. Why? Because they have robbed me of all that made a life of slavery endurable—because they killed my mother, my brother, my—my wife. Bah! I am a fool! What interest can you feel in my affairs? I only wonder that you do not laugh—laugh and sneer at the idea of a nameless slave and outcast prating of love and revenge."

There was an indescribable bitterness in the tiger-hunter's tone as he hissed forth the words, that strangely impressed the young couple. The language, too, was not such as might have been expected from one belonging to that usually ignorant and degraded class, the "civilized Indians" of New Mexico.

Whatever reply Pablo might have made was cut short by a terrible, prolonged chorus, beginning with the sharp barking yelp of the coyote and ending in the wild, piercing scream of the jaguar. Rosina instinctively drew nearer her brother, clutching his arm closely. The *tigrero* laughed shortly.

"Listen! is not that music to awaken a dead man? You see now how it happens that we met. The brutes come here for water, and for shelter from such storms as this. I was lying in wait for them when you came. Ha—again! You shall see royal sport—"

"Let us go, brother," faltered Rosina. "I am afraid—those terrible sounds chill my blood."

The tiger-hunter started at the sound of her voice, and as his eyes rested upon her pale face the wild glow in his eyes gradually died away. Slowly, as if reluctantly, he said:

"Your words are wise, lady. The storm-devil was whispering in my ear, bidding me slay—slay! But, life is longer than a day. I have sacrificed, now I will save. Come; the wind is carrying that," pointing to the charring body of the last slain tiger, "for leagues, and before day-dawn this clump of timber will be a den of wild animals. Will you trust me? See! I am calm now. I will guide you wherever you wish me."

Pablo did not hesitate long, but hurriedly described the point where they had left the train. In silence the tiger-hunter listened, then grasped the bridle-rein of Rosina's mustang, striding swiftly away from the oasis, gradually leaving behind them the increasing howls, snarlings and yelps of the swiftly-gathering wild beasts.

The wind was yet high, though the power of the tempest had considerably abated. It was, with a certain secret satisfaction in the confirmation of his own acuteness that Pablo found the wind blowing against his right shoulder as he strode along. And yet the tiger-hunter was perfectly honest and sincere in his belief that he was guiding them aright. At least a point of rocks, especially when only seen from a distance, can hardly be described beyond the possibility of mistake.

And when the first gleam of day-dawn broke upon the wearied wayfarers, a cry of satisfaction broke from the young cibolero's lips. Before him, scarce a mile distant, could be seen a point of rocks, jutting from a rugged mass of evergreen-studded hills. The general outline, even some of the minor details, were true to what the young man had described.

"But—where are they?" faltered Rosina, the old fear again assailing her heart, as she sought in vain for some traces of the expected train.

The tiger-hunter silently raised his head, and bent his ear. A peculiar, unmistakable sound came floating across the desert. Pablo laughed aloud.

"The carretas! Sweeter music I would not wish to hear, just now—eh, little sister?"

Rosina made no audible reply, though her pale cheek flushed brightly and her eyes sparkled as she urged the jaded *pongo* on at a more rapid pace. Beside her trotted Pablo and the tiger-hunter.

The sound of the wooden wheels grew louder and more plain, and as the trio reached the point of rocks, the keen eyes of the tiger-hunter caught sight of the train, just appearing from out a narrow defile.

The glad smiles quickly vanished from Pablo's face, and a cry of disappointment parted his lips. The first glance told him there was something wrong. The train was not that for which they had been searching. He turned to Rosina with an uneasy look.

"They are whites, at least," she faltered; "so they must be friends. Perhaps they can explain—can give us some tidings of our—our friends."

"We have no choice, since they have seen us," muttered Pablo, as half a dozen horsemen suddenly rode out from the train, fully armed.

"Black Garote!" gasped Rosina, as the leading horseman

drew near, a peculiar grin broadening upon his round, ill-featured face as he seemed to recognize the Raymons.

Pablo did not appear to share her uneasiness, and greeted the men frankly if not cordially, however proud and distant he might have been under other circumstances. At first the tiger-hunter held aloof, as though he meant to take his departure at once, but as though he interpreted aright the quick glance of Rosina's eye, he once more resumed his place at her rein.

Black Garote, the buffalo-hunter, was a half-breed Indian, though his features were more like those of a negro, and his hair was crisp and close curling. Very tall, with broad shoulders and powerful body, he was clumsily built; taken all in all, a more repulsive being could scarcely be imagined. His heart, too, was in keeping with his carcass.

Rosina bent low in the saddle and whispered to the tiger-hunter. She begged him to seek out her father and tell him where they were, repeating the half-breed's name, that he might know how to act.

"Do this, and I will pray for you, night and day!"

The tiger-hunter gently kissed her hand, then bowed and glided swiftly away. A sharp cry from Black Garote warned his men, and, as though all had been preconcerted, a terrible scene followed.

Three men galloped swiftly down upon the tiger-hunter, plying their stout bows with Indian-like dexterity. The attack was too sudden to be avoided. Without being given a chance to strike a return blow, the Indian fell, his body forming the sheath for a dozen arrows.

Garote dealt Pablo a brutal kick in the face that hurled the young cibolero bleeding and senseless to the ground, then grasped the reins of Rosina's horse, drowning her shriek of terror with his harsh, brutal laugh.

"You will not laugh and scorn me now, my dainty bird," he chuckled, as his brawny arms tightened round her waist, lifting her from the saddle and holding her helpless.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WAGER OF BATTLE.

His shrill yell floated tauntingly back as the young chief of the Comanches dashed through the last line of the Pawnee lodges and thundered away over the desert, almost ere his enemies realized what had occurred.

The Black Chief yelled forth his orders, even as he leaped toward his own half-saddled mustang, bidding his braves recapture the Comanche under peril of death. But hasty as they were, their efforts would have availed little against the big buckskin, and the Comanche might have laughed them to scorn, only for the young plainsman, by whom all this machinery had been put in motion.

With an agile bound he was in the saddle and then, uttering a single clear shout as he passed by the still prostrate borderman, he stretched out in swift pursuit of the big buckskin, whose mighty bounds, so long and powerful, were devouring the space with a rapidity that caused the bronze cheek of its rider to glow with proud surprise. Not only to escape, but to carry off this truly magnificent animal!

Then, with natural curiosity, he glanced back. He saw the Pawnee camp in wild confusion, a score of braves preparing their ponies for hot pursuit. A light cloud chased away the scornful smile, and the Comanche's brow lowered. It was not the preparations of the Pawnees that caused this. He knew right well that not one of a hundred mustangs could cope successfully with the big States horse.

But that blood bay, racing so level and true, with a long, sweeping stride, swift and regular as the action of a choice bit of machinery guiltless of jar or friction; from that young man of whose prowess he had already been a witness—from him alone had he cause for fear. Yet, though armed only with the knife left him by the dumb borderer, the young chief resolved never to return alive.

With a steady hand Jack Rabbit regulated the speed of his horse, knowing to an iota what the two animals were capable of, and that he could end the race at his own will. So, patiently biding his time, he glided along in the rear of the yellow horse, casting an occasional glance backward.

At length, when nearly five miles had been traversed, when the Pawnee camp had disappeared from view and the Pawnee riders were steadily growing less and less in the distance, Jack Rabbit shook up the blood-bay, and the struggle fairly began.

The keen-eyed Comanche had, ere this, detected the truth—knew that he was being played with, and, resolved to make a good fight, had carefully nursed his horse during the last mile or two. Now, as he felt the keen knife-point spurring his haunches, the yellow horse plunged forward with almost redoubled speed.

Jack Rabbit smiled grimly, and spoke to his horse. The blood-bay tossed its head, then stretched out still nearer the ground. More than once the two had been pitted against each other, nor was he to encounter defeat now, for the first time. Foot by foot, yard by yard the distance lessened, until the Comanche clutched the knife more tightly and nerved himself for a struggle. Yet he wondered why his pursuer did not make use of his rifle or pistol.

Steadily the blood-bay crept up nearer and nearer, until, at length, Jack Rabbit spoke, in the mongrel dialect, half-Spanish, half-Comanche, in general use among the *Comancheros*, or Indian traders.

"Let my red brother look back; a friend speaks to him. Look—my hands are empty, though the chief can see here fire-bows that hold more lives than he has fingers. There—would an enemy act so?"

As he spoke, Jack Rabbit checked his horse and dropped both revolvers and rifle to the ground, then folded his arms quietly. The Comanche wheeled his horse and rode back, a puzzled look upon his face. The whole affair was an enigma beyond his solving.

"Our tongues must be quick, for the Pawnee dogs are coming up. My tongue is straight and can only follow one trail; listen. Yesterday we were enemies, and fought each other. To-day we are friends, since I bade the silent man cut the thongs that bound a chief. Why did I do this? Some time you will know—not now. But now—you must go back to these dogs, with me."

The Comanche drew back, mechanically fingering his knife. A cold smile played around the adventurer's lips, as he unsheathed his own blade, with the words:

"I have said it. My brother must go with me, if not willingly and alive, then dead. We are armed alike. Do your best, for this is not my first war-trail."

The Comanche rode forward, but the long knife was held by the blade, its haft presented to Jack Rabbit.

"Keoxa is a chief. He can not bite the hand that saved his life. He will go with the White Lightning."

"Good; I know my brother again. We will return to the Pawnee wolves; but listen. Your life belongs to me. Let the wolves snarl and yelp, but they dare not bite."

Jack Rabbit hid the knife belonging to Tony in his bosom, lest it should tell tales to some of the keen-eyed Pawnees, and then, side by side the strange allies rode back toward the now visible pursuers. Yelling exultantly, the Pawnees flocked around, but a significant gesture of the young borderer repelled the hands that would have rudely seized the Comanche. With dark looks, the Pawnees contented themselves with forming a cordon around the twain; and then the young chief returned.

The Mad Chief came forward to meet them, as Jack Rabbit halted without the line of lodges. But Tony Chew was ahead of him, and at a significant sign from Jack, he took his position on the other side of the Comanche.

"It is well," said the Pawnee leader, in a cold, measured tone; "the snake stole the wings of an eagle, but did not know how to use them."

"He used them so well that not one of your braves were within sight when I overtook him," bluntly retorted Jack.

"It is you whom he must thank for what awaits him, then—the stake, with all the tortures that my braves can devise," replied the chief, with a sneer, speaking in Spanish.

"It seems to me that I have a word or two to say about that," laughed Jack Rabbit, coolly. "An hour ago things were different, but now—I don't care about torturing my captive."

The Mad Chief seemed about to burst forth with some angry reply, and his clenched fist was partially raised to give the signal so eagerly watched for by his braves; but as he saw the quiet resolution of the whites, their hands resting upon those terrible death-dealing revolvers, he hesitated.

"You claim his life, then?" he said, at length.

"He is my captive; just what I shall do with him, I can't say, but he shall not be tortured, that's settled."

A tall, battle-scarred warrior pressed through the ranks and spoke a few words in an angry tone, so rapidly that Jack could not follow him. But a cruel smile that curled the chief's white mustache, told that the words were not unwelcome to his ear.

"It is well," he said loudly, glancing around the circle.

"Ynetli is a great brave, but he only asks justice. See! his face is black, because his lodge is full of mourning. A Comanche dog blew out the light of Ynetli's life, and the father mourns for his son. The young brave can not take up the weary trail alone—he must have a dog to run down his game, a slave to wait upon him. The child of the Snake must die."

Jack was about to speak when the Comanche, who had evidently understood the Pawnee brave's speech, checked him.

"My brother is very kind, but Keoxa will send the father after his pappoose." Then, in a louder voice, he declared his eagerness to abide by the result of the wager of battle. If he conquered, he was to go free; if not—well!

Though Jack was plainly far from being satisfied, he felt that it would be impossible to obtain better terms. The wonder was that the Mad Chief had condescended to parley at all, when the power was so clearly in his own hands. Yet, as Jack compared the two men, he felt all his trouble and plotting had been for naught, so slight seemed the chances of the young Comanche. The one, slightly built, almost feminine in muscle and body, a mere lad. The other, a tall, wiry athlete, just in the prime of life, with muscles like whipcord and steel, his broad breast bearing the tokens of many a stoutly-contested fight.

Yet the Comanche appeared to have no fears of the result, calmly awaiting the preparations, by odds the coolest man among them all.

The preliminaries were brief and easily settled. The combatants were to fight on horseback—both Comanche and Pawnee are essentially *horse-Indians*—with knives, lances and lassoes. Two mustangs were selected, stout, fresh animals. The men drew for first choice; fortune favored Ynetli, and the crowd shouted aloud at what they considered a favorable augury. A mounted brave started his pony from a point of rocks, galloping around in a semicircle, giving the

rivals nearly five acres of ground on which to maneuver. The first who was forced across this line, at any point, must consider himself vanquished and submit to his rival.

Fully repeating the conditions, the Mad Chief motioned his braves away. When they had stationed themselves at regular intervals around the half circle, he gave the signal. Carefully testing their mounts, the rivals gradually neared each other, lasso in one hand, lance in the other.

The Pawnee was the first to make an open attack, dashing impetuously forward as though about to ride down the Comanche, yelling and swinging his rawhide lasso round his head. Just keeping his pony in motion, ready for advance or retreat, Keoxa awaited the attack.

Eager as he was to avenge his son, Ynetli was not one to run an unnecessary risk, and his mustang veered to the right when just without lasso-cast, Keoxa facing him warily. His tactics caused the young plainsman's face to brighten, and to think better of his chances.

The Pawnee made one complete circle, then his patience gave way, just as Keoxa had hoped. With a wild yell, he dashed in, the black, snakelike coils flashing through the air. Quick as thought the Comanche was on guard. Wheeling around, his back to the foe, he drew the reins taut, his long spear resting between his mustang's ears and upon his own bowed head. The noose fell upon this, and was instantly flung off as Keoxa wheeled and became the assailant in turn; but with better success.

Ynetli attempted the same guard, but was too late. The noose closed around his body, and as his only hope, he dashed direct for the young chief, with leveled lance. Keoxa also spurred forward, with ready spear, and for a moment it seemed as though both must fall. But not so. Swaying lightly aside, Keoxa urged his pony on with a shrill cry. A sharp *pluck*—a dull thud—and the Pawnee was hurled senseless to the ground.

Handling his mustang with marvelous skill, Keoxa wheeled and paused over the quivering body, driving his spear through and through, pinning the corpse to the blood-stained sands. The next moment he was shaking the gory scalp above his head, pealing forth his triumphant war-cry.

The Pawnees seemed mad with rage and shame, dashing toward the victor with wild yells for blood. But swift as they were, others were swifter. Jack and Tony thundered forward and stood beside the Comanche, with drawn and cocked revolvers. A clear, ringing shout—a hoarse, deep growl answered the shrill, vengeful yells.

CHAPTER X.

THE COMANCHE'S PLEDGE.

For the third time those two men boldly confronted the enraged Pawnees, quietly defying their worst. And for the third time the yelling, bloodthirsty horde was checked, even as their weapons quivered in the air, gathering force for the avenging blow.

A sharp cry was heard, even above the wild clamor, and a milk-white mustang glided through the crowd of excited braves, seeming to float rather than run, with its smooth, even pacing. Wheeling, it paused before the three men, its rider confronting the astonished Pawnees with bent bow and threatening arrow.

Despite his natural though quiet excitement, a little cry broke from Jack's lips, for, in this unexpected ally, he recognized the being a mere glimpse of whom had been sufficient to send the hot blood coursing through his veins only a few hours before; the maiden so sharply chidden by the Mad Chief.

"Back! the first brave who dares come within two spear's-length, until I give him leave, dies the death of a wolf! Back, I say! Are the Pawnees dogs and children of dogs that they should drink the blood of men whom they have called friends and brethren, with whom they have eaten, drank and smoked the peace-pipe? The spirit of evil is breathing upon your eyes, making you see the wicked thoughts that fill his own heart—it is *his* will you are working, not that of men and warriors."

The words in themselves were nothing extraordinary, but the delivery, the impassioned gestures and attitude of the young woman made ample amends. The foremost Pawnees shrunk back, their furious rage quelled, their eyes seeking the ground in speechless confusion.

Jack Rabbit gazed upon her with strangely mixed feelings. For the moment he forgot all else, remembered nothing of the death that had seemed so near, saw only that peerless face and figure.

Could a sculptor have modeled that picture—the mustang, quivering upon its haunches, its tail sweeping the sands, its red nostrils pressed close down to its breast by the taut rein; the lithe, graceful figure of the maiden, so full of passionate life—his fortune would have been assured.

Her figure, rounded, just full enough to escape the charge of voluptuousness, not above the average height of woman, admirably revealed by the close-fitting garb of fawn-skin, and fine scarlet cloth. Her hair, a deep blue-black, hung in a loose manner over her shoulders, confined only by a narrow band, which also supported several plumes plucked from the *graya*.

Printed words can scarcely give a just idea of even a com-

monplace face, and it would be rank folly for me to make the attempt in this case. Enough that, while not being *too* regular, the face of Mini Lusa—"Running Water"—was that of a very beautiful woman. Though her soft, olive-tinged skin bore faint traces of the sun's warmth, an eye less keen than that of the young plainsman could have told that the Indian blood ran faintly, if at all, in her veins.

As the last words dropped from her lips, cold and cutting, Mini Lusa raised a small wand or staff, and shook it in the air. The hollow hoofs of antelopes, the tails of rattlesnakes and little strings of shells emitted a curious sound as the staff, gayly bedecked with painted feathers and stained quills, flashed to and fro.

As though under a spell, the Pawnee braves fell back, their heads bowed, their eyes seeking the ground. Only the Mad Chief kept his place, an angry glow in his eyes.

"She carries big medicine," spoke the fingers of the mute borderer. "Lucky we are not both old and ugly."

Jack Rabbit did not reply, but his bronzed cheek grew a shade darker, and the light that filled his eye was not of anger.

"The Prophetess of the Wolf-Children has spoken the words of wisdom, whispered in her ear by the Great Spirit," slowly and distinctly uttered the Mad Chief. "Her children were mad, but now they are awake and will make amends. The pale-faces are our friends and brethren from this hour until the black mouth of death swallows us all up. The child of the Creeping Snakes is the captive of White Lightning, to deal with as he sees fit."

With these words the chief motioned his braves to disperse, and as they obeyed he rode up beside Mini Lusa. Though he poked in a low tone, meant for her ear alone, Jack Rabbit caught the words:

"Enough of this masquerade—you've played the fool long enough. Go to your lodge and remain there until I come."

"One word, lady," cried Jack Rabbit, impulsively, urging his horse to her side, careless of the angry glare that filled the old chief's eyes. "You saved our lives—mine and my friend's—when death seemed inevitable. From this hour on, these lives belong to you—"

"No thanks are required for performing one's duty," was the quiet, almost cold reply, as the maiden turned and rode swiftly away, disappearing among the lodges.

"We are a rude, hot-blooded people, senior," said the Mad Chief, in a tone of almost stately courtesy, "and have not yet learned to mask our feelings. Ynetli was loved and honored by all, and when he died our eyes were filled with blood. I thank you for interfering to save us from a crime. Be sure you will not be the less loved and respected now that our eyes are open."

Jack Rabbit muttered a few words of acknowledgment, but for the life of him could not help a little quiver of repugnance as he clasped the cold, moist hand. But the chief seemed satisfied as he rode away toward the encampment.

Through all this Keoxa remained quietly seated upon his horse, his dark eyes reading every change of the young man's face. When the chief retired, he spoke:

"The tongue is soft, but the heart is blacker than the painted face. He will strike from the grass without warning. Let White Lightning watch where he steps, and sleep with his eyes open."

"Others have teeth as well as he, and know how to use them, too. But let that pass. My brother heard what he said—that you were my captive, to deal with as I please. But he was wrong, for you are free and your own master. The trail is open for you, only—let the trail be a long one between this and night. The wolves are swift-footed and thirst for the blood of a warrior."

"The trail shall be a broad one if they choose to follow. Keoxa is young, and there is room for more scalps on his lodge-pole," was the quiet reply. "My brother, hearken. You have heard of Quamtli, the Great Eagle of the Comanches; when he takes the war-path, his braves are like the sands of the desert. The Eagle has only one child, Keoxa, who will be the head of the Snake Children when the great chief dies. Then, as now, Keoxa will have two brothers, White Lightning and Silent Tongue. His life belongs to them, as well as the lives of every Comanche. They have only to speak and their wishes shall be made good. See—the Wolf-Children have left me little but my skin; at the same time removing his girdle and cutting it in halves. 'This will do until we meet again. Bear this with you wherever you go. Show it to any of my tribe and they will give you their lives without a question.'"

"My brother sets too high a value on what we have done," replied Jack Rabbit, after a brief pause. "We set you free, that is true, but it was for our own good alone. We did not know you then, else it would have been different. We only saw in you one who might be able to serve us, not a friend and brother. The words seem hard and cold now, but they are true to our thoughts then. For years we have fought the Comanches, and never expected to find a dear brother among them."

"Listen. We have dear friends among our people in that train. You see the trap set around them. The wolves speak soft, but I can see that they are sharpening their teeth for a feast of blood. I have sworn to save my people or die with them, yet my heart was heavy, for I could see little hope. Then my eyes saw my brother—you. I said: life is sweet to the young. One who fought so well should not be left to die beneath the foul claws of the Wolf-Children. I said: I will set him free and then ask a favor of him. You are free—this is the favor

"The Mad Chief and his wolves are your enemies; Comanche blood stains this land. Wash out this stain with the muddy water that flows in their own veins. Ride swiftly to your people, call upon your braves, bid them prepare for a long, hard ride, tell them that your brothers are looking anxiously for their coming. This is what I ask of Keoxa."

"If the duty was harder, Keoxa would be more glad, but he promises. Listen, brother. It is two days' and nights' hard ride to my people. When the sun goes by four times, you will hear the war-cry of the Snake Children."

The conversation was prolonged for some minutes longer, during which signals and other minor items were arranged, besides the young chief explaining the cause of his being found in such an humble position under the renegade.

It seemed that true love can find its way into the skin lodges of the desert inhabitants as well as the haunts of civilization. Keoxa loved and proved successful in his wooing, but on the third night after the soft-eyed Snake child came to his lodge, he held a corpse in his arms. His heart crushed with grief, Keoxa wandered away into the desert and falling in with the renegade, eagerly joined his marauding party as a simple brave.

The new-made friends parted, the young chief riding swiftly away over the desert, the comrades returning to the "trap." They found the buffalo-hunters cheerful and unsuspecting, busily engaged in repairing their wagons and harness after the long, hard desert journey. As agreed upon, the friends did not say anything to alarm the traders.

The chief was consoling Don Raymon and his wife, whose anxiety for the safety of their children increased with every hour of their absence. He declared that his braves would speedily return with the lost ones. Raymon half-decided to set forth himself, but was finally dissuaded. Perhaps he would have been more obstinate had he not discovered that at least one sincere friend was upon the trail, and had been for hours, though his absence had not been suspected until that morning. Who this friend was, the reader shall soon learn.

Pondering over the complicated situation in which he found himself, Jack Rabbit lay upon the grass in the shade of a towering mass of rock. Not only was his own life in danger, but, if the vague words of Tony Chew were to be believed, so were those of others who should be very dear to him. And while racking his brain to solve the enigma, a light footfall caught his attention. Glancing up, he saw Mini Lusa, a finger pressed upon her red-ripe lips, standing beside him.

That Jack was no coward, many a wild and daring deed bore ample evidence, yet in that moment, while those glorious eyes were beaming down upon him, he colored and trembled like the veriest schoolboy detected in mischief by the stern eyes of his teacher.

"Why do you linger here, wasting the minutes that should be used in carrying you far from this spot?" came the low, guarded tones, as the maiden cast a wary glance around.

"My friends are here," stammered Jack, scarce knowing what he said.

"Are they worth dying for—or rather with? The bravest man may retreat without shame, when he can only die by remaining, without doing any good. You are brave—you proved that, out yonder—but if you remain here, you must die. Flee while you can—to-morrow will be too late. You are warned—be wise and save your life for the sake of those who are dear to you."

She abruptly paused and glided away as the tall form of the Mad Chief drew near, leaving Jack most deliciously bewildered.

CHAPTER XI

THE HALF-BREED'S WOOING.

BLACK GAROTE made but a short day's journey, after capturing Rosina and Pablo Raymon, going into camp before the sun set. During the day, the young buffalo-hunter lay, bound and helpless, in the bottom of one of the rough, jolt-ing carretas. Rosina was permitted to ride, but the half-breed was never more than arm's-length from her bridle-rein, as though he feared the bird he prized so highly would take to wing and fly away over the desert, never more to return.

His men, rude, uncouth fellows enough, laughed and joked among themselves at the evident infatuation of their doughty chief; but Black Garote never noticed them. Other eyes too, were upon them, with anything but an amiable look. White teeth grated angrily together, a little paw sought the bone-handled dagger that lay hidden in a hot, heaving bosom; all through that long, weary day, only a wonderful exercise of self-denial prevented the Indian woman from springing upon her rival—for what woman could long resist the noble, the superb Garote?—and ending all with one swift, sure stroke that should send the trusty blade down through that fair bosom, to the heart that was gradually softening toward Garote—her Garote.

As the night came down, the camp-fires blazed up cheerily, shining upon the gray rocks, reflecting from the tiny stream that wound its way through the crags and moss grown bowlders. Only one little dingy skin tent marked the spot. Until now this had been sacred to the use of Black Garote and the Indian woman; the other men had left their women behind them.

Before the swaying blanket that had served the purpose of a door, sat Rosina, preferring the rudely admiring gaze of the hunters to the risking a private *tete-a-tete* with Garote. That worthy crouched at her feet, urging her to eat.

"You need not be afraid, little one," he laughed, shortly. "The girl has clean hands, if nothing else. Eat—you will need all your strength before you see your people again."

"You will take us back to-morrow? We will say nothing—only that you were very kind to us, and took much trouble to restore us to our friends. Do this—you shall never regret it. We are not rich, but you shall be well paid for your trouble."

It was with difficulty that Rosina schooled herself to speak these words in a quiet, even tone; but whatever faint hope she may have had, vanished at the coarse laugh and coarser words of the half-breed.

"Yes, my reward would be a curse and perhaps a kick—I know Felipe Raymon well. He is so proud because he can tell who his father and grandfather was—of his 'blue blood.' And yet he is no more than I—a poor cibolero. Take you back? Am I a fool? Do you remember the last time we met—at your home? I came then, a man, good as the best in the land; a man who can hold his own with the best hunter, the surest *rustler*, boldest rider—the equal of any, unless it be in not having a smooth, baby face. I came to ask for you—as a wife. What was my answer? He—your father—set his peons on me, had me kicked into the ditch and chased for miles by his dog. You see, I have not forgotten!"

Rosina sat in silence after this outburst. She realized how utterly vain words would be, and a cold, sickening dread crept over her heart as she realized how utterly she was at the mercy of this brutal, vengeful being.

"These are not the words I meant to speak," added the half-breed, choking down his angry recollections with an effort. "You forced them from me by bringing up the past. If you are wise, you will be more careful. Though I love you—stop! You must listen to me. Where can you go? These men are all my own, and at a sign from me would wring you pretty neck, and never sleep a wink the worse after. I warned Felipe Raymon that my time would come; and this is it."

"You are here at my mercy. I can use you as I see fit. And yet I will be generous. Once more—will you be my wife?"

"Never—a thousand times no!" cried Rosina, her cheek flushing, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Wait; never is a long word, and easier spoken than lived up to. Let me give you some reasons for saying *yes*. As I hinted, before, I have the power to make you what the woman yonder, Paquita, is—which would be worse than becoming my wife with the priest's blessing."

"Then—think of your brother. He is young, and life is sweet to him, no doubt. I believe you love him, too. For his sake, then, you will give me the promise I ask."

"He would curse me were I weak enough—"

"You don't give me credit for half my power," and the half-breed laughed viciously. "I think I can soon win him over to my side, and even cause him to beg that you will marry me. Does that surprise you? Listen:

"I said these men were mine, body and soul. Two of them are pure Indians; all of them have red blood in their veins. Torturing a prisoner will come natural to them. Every evening I will ask you that question. If you refuse, you shall sit by me and watch my men at work, listen to the shrieks and groans of your brother as he prays you to have pity on him. Ha! that touches you!"

Rosina shuddered and leaned back against the lodge, faint and heart-sick. The fiendish words of the brutal half-breed filled her with terror such as she had never felt before. Alone, helpless in his power, her situation was indeed miserable.

The half-breed continued, but his words sounded faintly upon her ear, without conveying any understanding.

"You know now what to expect. I have threatened no more than I can perform—no more than I *will* do if you continue obstinate. On the other hand, if you are sensible and make me the promise—swear to become my wife in an oath that I know you will never dare to break—you shall be treated with all respect and kindness, you and your brother. I will take you at once to the Mission San Saba, where the holy fathers can satisfy even your scruples."

"But enough now. You can think over my words to-night. This tent is yours. No one shall enter it without your permission. Go in, now; and consider well what I have said."

The moment she had served the rude viands, Black Garote had motioned the Indian woman, Paquita, away. From a distance she had watched them, the hot, mad jealousy rising in her bosom until her eyes glowed like those of an enraged cat, as she saw how eager the half-breed grew, how animated his gestures were, how utterly forgotten was his wonted indolent laziness. Though the words were inaudible to her, Paquita could easily follow his speech, so mobile had passion rendered his features, and the strong, white teeth fairly met in the red, full lip unnoticed in her suffocating hatred. Not against him, though he had so utterly forgotten as to make hot love to another woman beneath her very eyes. All of her hatred was for Rosina—and that hatred deepened as she saw how the maiden shrunk back from the eager half-breed, a look of fear and loathing upon her pale face. It was then that Paquita grasped her knife and stole nearer the couple, crouching down close beside the lodge, her ears eagerly drinking in the words of the half-breed her hot passion rising

higher with every moment, until she could scarce refrain from springing upon the woman who had robbed her of his love, and driving the biting steel deep down to the very depths of her cold heart. Fortunately for them all, Black Garote said his say, and motioning Rosina to enter the lodge, he turned away and rejoined his men.

Paquita came and crouched beside her lord and master as he lay beside the glowing fire, so grateful to his tropical nature, keeping him supplied with tiny cigarettes. The cibolero lazily laughed as he watched the bronzed, comely face. She was taking it easy, he thought, little guessing what a whirlpool of passion was concealed beneath that calm exterior.

One by one the men rolled their blankets around them and lay down to sleep. A guard had been set, but it was little more than a matter of form, since they were at peace with the Indians, by virtue of their calling. And so, from a sitting posture against the gray boulder, the sentinel soon lay at full length, fast buried in sleep.

The moon rolled on, and the little valley was cast into deep shadow by the towering rock-wall. The fires had died out. The sleeping figures grew more and more indistinct.

The sentinel was soundly sleeping. Had he been awake and fully alert, he would have heard a peculiar sound—the yelping bark of a coyote, faint and subdued, as though coming from a distance. His eyes would probably have wandered out upon the desert, possibly would have rested upon the dark, shadow-like shape creeping along so slowly, each moment drawing nearer his position. A hungry coyote, most likely, drawn thither by the hope of finding a stray bone.

Nearer and nearer the shadow came, never deviating from a direct course—in this alone differing from the prowling, restless wolf. The sleeping sentinel breathed deeply, as though to guide the midnight marauder.

A light cloud passed over the moon. When the soft light once more bathed the earth, the shadow had disappeared. Perhaps it had slunk back into the desert again.

And yet—a faint, rustling sound came from the inside of the little valley. A slight puff of wind whirled between the rocks and blows the white ashes off a still smoldering brand. For a moment the red coal gleams out brightly, flickering into a tiny blaze. Again the sentinel missed a curious sight.

As the coal burst into flame, a dark figure sunk down amid the prostrate forms of the buffalo-hunters, and lay like one dead. But there was a quick glimmer of bared steel—then once again all was silent and dark.

Slowly the figure raised its head, and glared around, the eyes shining through the gloom with a phosphorescent light. All was still. Then, as if reassured, the shadow moved slowly, away from the slumbering ciboleros, its progress silent as that of a serpent leisurely gliding over the sandy waste.

It paused beside the tent, cautiously passing a hand over the door-flap. This was securely pinned down, and after a moment's fumbling at the pegs, the shadow passed around the lodge into the deeper shadow.

The keen knife was brought into play. With admirable skill, a triangular cut was made in the tight skin. A moment's pause—then the shadow crept into the tent.

The sentinel abruptly ceased his snoring, and moved restlessly, uttering a few incoherent words in his sleep. Like magic a shadow arose beside him; a broad palm towered above his parted lips, a sinewy arm was uplifted for a moment, then descended with a dull, ominous *thud*. Though death-stricken, the brawny cibolero sprang half erect, a hoarse, gurgling cry bursting from his lips as the long blade was drawn from his heart.

The death-cry was drowned by a long, shrill yell—a dozen throats uniting in the terrible war-cry, and the desert seemed alive with shadows.

A piercing shriek of pain or terror came from the little tent.

CHAPTER XII.

KNIGHTS OF THE DESERT.

THE remainder of that day and night passed by without any occurrence of especial note to our friends at the circular valley.

With every hour the Mad Chief found it a harder matter to keep Felipe Raymon from starting forth in search of his children. As yet nothing had been heard from the Pawnees who had first taken the trail, and the bereaved one's hopes were gradually growing less and less, though never once did they suspect that the chief was playing them false.

Jack confided to Tony the startling words of Mini Lusa. The old man, after a moment's self-communion, spelled upon his fingers:

"Get her to speak plainer. She will if you ask it, as you can ask. We can't sneak away from *them*, and every point will help."

But Jack was unable to carry out this plan. If Mini Lusa had not left the encampment, she kept so close that an interview was impossible.

During the night, the Pawnees went through with their scalp-dance, commemorating their victory over the Comanches, and it was far along in the small hours before all was quiet.

During this scene of almost demoniac revelry, Jack Rabbit and Tony stood on guard, half expecting the signal which should herald the massacre; but the hour had not yet come.

Soon after daylight the sports began. The majority of the buffalo-hunters joined right willingly; after their long, tedious journey, any relaxation had a double charm. There were races, both with horses and afoot. In the latter, the ciboleros were generally the victors, for the Pawnees only show to advantage when mounted. There followed lasso fights, mock contests with blunted spears and arrows, during which the contestants exhibited remarkable skill and wonderful horsemanship.

Leaning idly against the rocks, though their horses were near, saddled and bridled ready for work, Jack and Tony watched the sports with little interest. They knew that after this farce must come the tragedy.

The Pawnee chief half reclined upon a pile of robes placed over a boulder, coldly observing the movements of those below. His programme had been thoroughly arranged, and every motion of his hand was understood and carried out by his dusky aides.

Beside him sat Mini Lusa, holding the strangely ornamented wand that denoted her rank as medicine-woman. A richly embroidered scarf of silk was hung over her shoulders. Many a longing eye rested upon it, for all knew that when the sports of the day ended the brave that displayed the greatest skill and address would be called upon to receive the scarf from the fair hands of Running Water.

"The old man is watching us close as a hawk does a sage rabbit," muttered Jack to his comrade. "If we want to keep his eyes full of dust we've got to do something besides sitting here like two bumps on a log. You don't mind, old man Tony?"

"It's the girl, rather," quickly spelled Chew, smiling grimly. "Take care; she comes of treacherous stock."

Jack rode forward without any reply. A lull in the exercises favored him, and all eyes were turned upon the young man as he rode before the chief, bowing low as he dropped his sombrero to the prophetess.

His request was promptly granted, and Jack was soon in the possession of bow and quiver, spear and buffalo-hide shield. The curiosity of all was aroused as the Mad Chief arose and stated that the two friends would give a scene from desert life—a duel between red-skin and pale-face.

Jack Rabbit dropped all superfluous clothing, placing them, together with his rifle and pistols, near the center of the arena, where a sudden dash would regain them, in case the chosen moment for the tragedy should be at hand. Chew simply looked to his pistol, then awaited the signal.

What followed can hardly be described. The discovery, the cautious advance, the brief pantomime, the yell and the charge. How the red-skin—as represented by Jack—circled round and round the pale-face, clinging to the mane and saddle, now discharging an arrow from beneath his animal's neck, now under his belly, now springing upright with a shrill yell, clashing spear and shield together as though seeking to draw his rival's fire.

At length the rifle cracked—and yelling triumphantly, the Indian charged direct for his enemy. Standing firm as a rock, the borderer raised his arm and his revolver began to speak. Swinging from side to side, dextrously handling his shield as though to ward off the swift coming bullets, the red-man kept closing nearer and nearer to his antagonist. His pistol emptied, the borderer sought to draw another, but with a shrill yell of exultation, the desert warrior forged alongside, leaped from his horse and alighted fairly behind his rival, drawing his head back and plying his knife with such a fidelity to nature that more than one of the buffalo-hunters uttered cries of angry alarm. Then, with the final pantomime of scalping his victim, Jack rode swiftly up to where the Mad Chief sat, holding aloft the hide shield where all eyes could see it. The low murmur of applause abruptly broke forth in a long shout, as the spectators saw and counted the seven bullet-holes in the shield. They scarcely knew which to admire most, the activity and address of Jack Rabbit, his perfect trust in his comrade, or the cool self-reliance and wonderful marksmanship of Chew.

But there was one face, at least, among the company that grew darker with a scowl of hatred, one voice that gave a grunt of contempt when all others were raised in praise, and when the clamor subsided he rode forward and confronted Jack.

A tall, lithe brave, young, yet bearing upon his broad, nude chest more than one deep scar, telling of hotly contested melees; the model of an Indian warrior, with an eagle-like face.

His words came hot with passion, yet Jack understood his meaning perfectly. It was a challenge to meet him in a singular duel, one requiring no little skill and address, where the defeated would be covered with disgrace.

Even with less confidence in himself, Jack could not have refused beneath the bright eyes of Running Water, but he was thoroughly aroused, and naturally, gladly welcomed the chance of further "showing off."

"The dog means mischief, lad," said Tony, as they drew aside to prepare for the contest. "Don't give away a chance—if he gets the better of you you're a dead man!"

"He is a dog, and I'm your pupil, old man Tony," laughed Jack. "You'll not have to buy mourning for me this time."

The simple preparations were quickly made. Each man, mounted, of course, bore a lasso, a headless lance, and a knife; nothing more. The half circle was freshly marked out, and mounted braves stationed at regular intervals along the line for the purpose of seeing that the rivals kept within bounds. One foot over the line meant disgraceful defeat.

In a gentle canter the antagonists approached each other, gradually veering to the right, until they fairly changed sides; then circled round and round, their left hand toward each other, scarce two lasso lengths apart.

Cool and confident, Jack waited for the Pawnee to make the first move, for he saw that the brave was strangely angry at him, from some cause, and felt assured that his rage would soon afford an effective opening.

Had Jack known the truth—that the Pawnee was an ardent suitor for Mini Lusa's hand—he might not have been quite so nonchalant.

A quick breath from the spectators as they saw the red man suddenly dart forward and hurl his lasso, its snake-like folds clearly outlined against the sky.

But Jack was not caught napping. Up rose his hand clutching the long shaft that guarded both his own head and that of his horse; almost the only guard that can avail aught against the fatal lasso.

The noose fell harmlessly to the ground. Wheeling as upon a pivot, the blood-bay sprang forward, the lasso circling around Jack's head, and a sharp, warning cry arose from the savages as they saw their comrade's danger. But what was their surprise when Jack abruptly paused, lowering his weapon, and quietly waited until the raging Pawnee recovered his lasso. What could it mean?

The answer soon came. Boiling over with rage and chagrin, the Pawnee charged once more. Jack hung the rope over his pommel and dropped his pole, a cold, steely glitter in his eyes.

The rope hissed through the air, a hoarse cry burst from the big borderer's lips as he saw the noose settle fairly over Jack's right arm. A yell of fiendish joy came from the Pawnee as he wheeled his pony and dashed away. A clear, taunting laugh answered as Jack Rabbit thundered on in close pursuit.

Astounded at feeling no welcome *pluck* upon the lasso, the Pawnee glanced over his shoulder. A wild glare came into his eyes as he saw the pale-face close in his rear, the noose around his shoulder, his right hand grasping the ring, yet making no effort to cast off the weapon. And seeing this, for once in his life the battle-scarred warrior felt a thrill of absolute fear. He could have met death without a tremor, but this—undying disgrace!

The game lay in Jack's hands. His horse was the swiftest, he could choose his own distance. The only way the Indian could escape the punishment in store, was to cut his own lasso—an act that would forever disgrace him.

On they raced, Jack forcing the wretched brave close along the boundary, with each moment coming nearer to where sat the chief and his daughter. Before them Jack decided to end the struggle. Twice did the Pawnee charge his enemy, but as often was he foiled and forced back, each time Jack gathering up more of the slack rope.

Then the end came. Pricking his horse, Jack forged alongside, flung a turn of the rope around the Indian's neck, then wheeled, tearing him from his horse, hurling him to the ground, bleeding and senseless.

All partisan feeling was forgotten, and Jack was hailed the victor in one long, loud yell. The Mad Chief motioned him to advance, but Mini Lusa sprang to the ground and met him half-way. And as Jack bowed his head to receive the badge of honor, she whispered earnestly:

"Flee while you can. To-night, after the feast, the word will be given, and every pale-face in the company will be massacred!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A LOVER ON THE TRAIL.

WITH heavy step and drooping head, a mustang toiled slowly through the dry, glistening sand. Its coat was rough and harsh with dried sweat and dust; its ears hung down, its tongue protruded like that of an exhausted dog.

Its rider was not in much better case. He, too, bore traces of long and hard traveling, if not of positive suffering. His dress was disordered, his face haggard, a wild, hunted expression filled his eyes.

Suddenly his gaze became fixed, and he involuntarily tightened the reins, the willing mustang halting in his tracks. Before him, until now hidden by a jutting spur of rocks, was a peculiar scene. Though fully a mile distant, every detail was distinctly visible in that rarefied atmosphere.

A dozen dark shapes were moving to and fro, round and round a prostrate figure—the figure of a man lying upon the scorching sands near the edge of the rocky tract, still and motionless as though dead.

Nearer and nearer swooped the heavy-winged scavengers—the black vultures—their broad wings shadowing the body of the unfortunate, until one, bolder or more hungry than its mates, fairly settled upon the man's shoulders.

A sharp cry broke from the traveler's lips as he saw the vulture hurriedly rise from its perch, and, with its mates, flap heavily away as though terrified. He saw the seeming corpse lift its arms and strike carelessly around, then sink back once more.

With a wild, strange hope mingled with dread, the rider urged his mustang forward. His progress was slow, and the winged scavengers, as though resolved not to be robbed of their prey, settled down in a flock around the wretch, their

sharp claws and powerful beaks quickly arousing the feeble spark of life, and the unhappy wretch fought desperately to defend himself.

A well-aimed arrow pierced one of the vultures through and through, and the traveler uttered a loud shout. With discordant cries and reluctant wings, the zopilotes abandoned the unequal contest.

Leaping from the saddle, the horseman stooped over the prostrate figure. Nearly naked, it was that of an Indian. From between his shoulders protruded the feathered shafts of two arrows. Other wounds were visible upon his side and broad breast, as though the arrows had been torn or cut out, the holes being rudely stopped with moss and grass.

A cry of recognition broke from the young man's lips as the large bloodshot eyes met his own, and it seemed as though the remembrance was mutual, though the dying man vainly tried to speak. Instantly the traveler's water-gourd was produced, and its last drops drained into the sufferer's mouth. Scant and tepid as was the draught, it proved sufficient.

"Don Leon," huskily gasped the tiger-hunter; "I saved your life once—you made me a promise."

"I did—I promised to assist you if ever you needed help."

"I claim it now—not for myself. My trail is ended—I've struck my last tiger—thanks to the coward hands—but listen—"

In broken yet intelligible sentences, the dying man told his story; how he had met Rosina and Pablo—though he knew not their names—of their meeting with Black Garote, and his vain attempt to escape with Rosina's message.

"She said—tell Don Felipe Raymon—"

That was enough. Leon Sandoval interrupted him with a sharp cry, his eagerness so great that he could scarce wait for the answer to his question.

The tiger-hunter had seen, even as he fell, bristling with arrows, the rude seizure of the brother and sister, and knew that the maiden's worst fears had been realized. For hours he lay as though dead, but finally recovered enough to drag himself along the hot sands, heading for the point of rocks described by Pablo, the counterpart of the one where they met Black Garote.

"Save her—that's all—I ask," gasped the tiger-hunter, his head falling back.

The end of his earthly trail was reached. Yet he had lived long enough to deliver Rosina's message.

Eager as he was to follow up the clue so strangely found, the young man restrained his impatience. Though, in common with all of his race, the Spaniard had been taught to consider the "civilized Indians" as of less value than the beasts of the field, Sandoval made an exception in favor of the tiger-hunter, and could not abandon even his dead body to the vultures.

With some difficulty the corpse was lifted to the saddle and conveyed to the rocks. There, in a little hollow, the remains of the tiger-hunter were deposited, a pile of bowlders above the grave insuring it undisturbed repose.

Don Leon Sandoval was a far more important personage than the position he had been given in this chronicle would seem to indicate. The son of a wealthy *haciendado*—and a *rico* in his own right—he joined the buffalo-hunters, or probacion, as it were. He it was of whom Rosina thought during her wild race, his the face she expected to meet instead of that of Pablo. That they loved and were beloved, was no secret. Don Leon it was who left the wagon-train on the night of the storm; since that time he had been roving almost aimlessly through the desert, until, when hope was almost dead, he met with the faithful tiger-hunter, who lived just long enough to deliver Rosina's message.

Forgetting his own thirst and fatigue, Don Leon urged his jaded mustang on, following the broad, blood-stained trail left by the tiger-hunter. He had no definite plan in view; only to reach the spot where his heart was held captive. He knew little of Black Garote, but that little was enough to proclaim him an ugly customer, particularly with the odds in his favor.

Don Leon made but one halt on the way; at a little spring which gurgled from beneath a huge bowlder, surrounded by a little patch of rich, succulent grass, very grateful to the hard-worked mustang, who greedily cropped while his master munched some tough tassajo.

The sun was low down in the west when Don Leon first caught sight of the rude carts, the dolorous screeching of which had guided him for an hour or more. The buffalo-hunters were just going into camp, and when satisfied of this, Don Leon concealed his horse among the rocks and stealthily crept forward, bearing bow and arrow, knife and lasso, the latter coiled around his body in such fashion as not to interfere with his movements.

Though an ardent lover, a bold and skillful enemy, Don Leon was still cool-headed and far-sighted enough to see that a single false move might be fatal to all concerned. While cover was plenty, the danger of being discovered by some of the keen-eyed ciboleros when contrasted with the white rocks was such that it was full sunset before Don Leon gained a position within arrow-flight of the encampment.

His heart beat high as he distinguished the figure of Rosina, but the light quickly deepened in his eyes as he noted the self-possessed air of the huge half-breed, who was then giving his ultimatum, before sending his captive into her tent.

While the buffalo-hunters were still engaged in eating, Don Leon made out the position occupied by Pablo, who was securely bound to one of the clumsy wooden wheels, in a sitting posture. His escape, unaided, was impossible; yet a cool

skillful man might hope to gain his side undiscovered under the cover of night. And while carefully marking out the best avenue of approach, Don Leon saw that the carreta to which Pablo was secured, contained several bows and sheafs of arrows, together with a rifle—the one captured with him.

Quiet at length fell over the encampment, and Don Leon saw that the moment for action was come. Leaving his covert, he glided cautiously forward. He knew that only one sentinel had been placed, and that upon the opposite side of the arena, or toward the desert. Unless some of the sleeping hunters were aroused, he believed that after freeing Pablo, they could steal away with Rosina, unobserved.

With a coolness and patience which few men can boast, Don Leon crawled nearer and nearer the camp, lying flat upon his stomach and only advancing by inches while out in the moonlight. More than once he paused and remained motionless for minutes, as some one of the sleepers moved restlessly, or turned over.

But then, gaining the deeper shadow, he could work more rapidly, and was soon close beside the prisoner. For a moment he hesitated, fearful that Pablo would betray all by some sound or outcry, but then he made out the youth's eyes gazing keenly upon him.

"Hist—'tis I—Leon," he cautiously whispered, as he applied his knife to the thongs. "For the Virgin's sake, be cautious!"

At any other moment, one or other of the train could scarcely have escaped seeing the dim, phantom figure which glided past the carreta, toward the skin lodge. As it was, the shadow faded away in the gloom, unobserved.

"Here—arm yourself," muttered Don Leon, as Pablo stretched his arms, free of the thongs.

At that moment came the hoarse, gurgling shout of the death-stricken sentinels—the shrill war-whoop of the desert warriors—the piercing scream from the skin-lodge; all mingling with the snorting of the terrified animals and the confused cries of the half-sleeping buffalo-hunters.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

FOR a moment the young men were fairly bewildered, and stood motionless, still grasping the weapons they had appropriated from the carreta. Not but that they knew what had occurred; they had both of them heard the Pawnee war-cry before, but the interruption coming just as they were beginning to congratulate themselves upon the success of their boldness momentarily stunned and confused them.

Don Leon was the first to recover, and clutching Pablo by the wrist, he cried:

"Keep close to me—to the tent. If we do not get her off now, all is lost!"

With these words, the young cibolero darted forward and sprung heavily against the door-flap, tearing it loose and carrying it with him to the ground with almost stunning violence. Pablo followed close upon his heels, and for a moment or two there was rare confusion within the lodge.

Fortunately for our friends, the death-yell of the sentinel had disarranged the plans of the Pawnees, or else their hopes had not gone beyond stampeding the stock of the buffalo-hunters, since they made no regular charge into camp, contenting themselves with yelling in hideous concert and discharging their arrows from under cover of the bowlders. Emboldened by this, the attacked gradually advanced nearer the edge of the desert, plying their weapons as well as the gloom would permit.

Favored by these circumstances, Don Leon and Pablo were not noticed as they crossed the open space, were not heard as they blundered into the tent, though a sharp cry of joy broke from the lover's lips as his outstretched hand came in contact with a human face, as he strove to rise.

A terrible fear seized his heart as he lifted the limp, nerveless form in his trembling arms, lest his loved one was dead. Her lips were warm, as he touched them, and he even fancied that he could feel her heart throb faintly in answer to his own as he pressed the dear form to his breast.

"She has only fainted," he whispered, hoarsely, to Pablo. "Lead the way out—quick! for the love of the Holy Mother."

As they left the lodge, several dark figures dodging along among the bowlders bade them beware how they left the shade for the moon-lighted stretch, unless they wished to court discovery. All his hunter instincts aroused, Pablo turned and glided away through the shadows, keeping close to the rocky wall, thinking only of getting beyond sight and ear-shot of the camp as quickly as possible.

The hearts of the young men beat painfully as the clamor from beyond the camp abruptly ended. Was the fight—if such it could be called—over, and if so, which party had proved victorious?

The next moment, a hoarse, bellowing cry of furious rage filled the little valley with its echoes. A grating curse passed the tight-clenched teeth of Don Leon. He knew that the truth had been discovered by Black Garote, who would spare no efforts to recapture his prey.

"On, Pablo!" he muttered, sternly. "Keep in the shade, and if they overtake us, remember that we are fighting for more than life—for your sister's honor!"

Burdened as he was, Don Leon kept pace with the young buffalo-hunter. Scrambling over or around the numerous boulders, they pressed on through the deep shadow, taking little heed to their course, hearing only the angry shouts and curses of the enraged cibolero, to which were now joined the shrill yells of the savages. Had the two bodies, so recently seeking each other's blood, combined? If not, then the fight had been renewed, and had turned against the buffalo-hunters since the wild sounds were coming up the valley, right in the wake of the fugitives.

Don Leon paused for a moment, as if to assure himself of this fact, then spoke to Pablo.

"We must hide and let them pass by, then we can double and reach my horse. Watch for a covert."

Scarcely another hundred yards had been traversed, when the young cibolero sharply plucked Don Leon's sleeve and turned abruptly to the left, entering what seemed to be a deep, narrow pass through the high, rocky hills. The entrance was tolerably well screened by bushes, but the keen eye of the young hunter had caught sight of the divided rocks above, and reason told him the rest.

The fugitives only entered the defile for a few yards, then Don Leon resigned his charge for the first time, stealing back to the entrance with ready bow. The angry yells and shouts from down the valley came nearer, and he could tell that the buffalo-hunters were sullenly retreating before the savages, yet contesting every foot of the ground.

"If they only keep it up!" he muttered, uneasily, glancing above his head, where the divided rocks showed so plainly.

There was little room for choice either way. Were the hunters pressed too hard, might they not seek refuge in the pass, where they could make a stout defense against ten times their number? Again, were the savages to abandon the fight, it was scarcely probable that Black Garote would submit to the loss of his captives without a thorough and systematic search.

Don Leon was not long kept in suspense. When nearly opposite the cut he heard the hoarse voice of Black Garote ordering his men to fall back into the opening, and only pausing long enough to catch a glimpse of the dark figures, Don Leon hastened back to Pablo, a curse upon his lips, a disagreeable foreboding busy at his heart.

"The dogs are coming in here," he muttered, with a sign for Pablo to be cautious. "Pick your way with care—a misstep might be fatal. If they once suspect our presence here they will have us foul."

"They might run us down, but some of them wouldn't live long enough to crow over us," muttered the youth.

A few moments later the increased clamor—the fiercer shouts and more vindictive yells—that came along the defile, told the fugitives that the buffalo-hunters were stoutly defending the entrance.

"Make haste, Pablo," grated Don Leon. "Now is our time—"

"I would, only—the way is blocked up!" gasped Pablo.

For a moment Sandoval stood in silent horror, then gently lowering his burden, he sprung forward. But all was in vain. The defile abruptly ended in a high, almost perfectly smooth wall. They were in a trap—the pass was nothing more than a pocket!

They realized the full force of their discovery. They could retreat no further. Were the buffalo-hunters driven in by the savages the fugitives could only hope to escape through desperate fighting, as the defile narrowed down until two persons could not pass abreast. Were the whites victorious they would hardly omit searching such an apparently snug hiding-place.

When convinced that further retreat was cut off, the comrades selected a spot, as well as possible amid the intense gloom, from whence they could hold at bay any enemy from without, and in low whispers discussed their chances of ultimate escape.

The cries and shouts from the mouth of the pocket had died away, and all was intensely, almost oppressively still. Then, for the first time since they left the encampment, a faint sound came from the captive for whom they dared so much.

In an instant Don Leon was by her side, gently calling her by name; assuring her that all was well. For a few moments there was no answer. She lay quiet in his arms, suffering his eager lips to dwell upon hers, as her consciousness gradually returned and her memory grew stronger.

"Rosina, darling, speak to me—tell me that you know me—your Leon," he murmured, his cheek pressed to hers.

"Who Rosina? me Paquita," came the quick reply, as the lithe form suddenly glided out of her arms. "Who—oh! me know now! Curse Rosina—me kill her, dead, dead, two, t'ree times over!"

The tones were little less musical than those Don Leon had expected to hear—but the words! He started back in utter astonishment, for the moment unable to realize the terrible mistake they had made.

Fortunately the woman had not yet comprehended the whole truth, else she might easily have escaped.

"Who you men? what you make wid me here?" cried the woman, her voice raising higher and more shrill as her excitement increased, until there was danger of her being heard by the enemy without. "What dis place—where dat woman—"

Pablo was the first to recover his senses, and springing forward he grasped the Indian woman, one hand firmly clasping her lips, just in time to stifle a loud shriek.

"Be silent—raise your voice above a whisper and by all the saints I'll kill you, woman or no woman!" he muttered, sternly, as his choking gripe gradually relaxed.

The woman seemed cowed and sunk to the ground with a low whimper. Had there been light, had she understood the whole situation, she would have acted differently. But it was all a mystery to her. The last she remembered was being in the tent, and now—where was she?

Don Leon drew closer to her, and spoke in a harsh, strained voice:

"There was a lady in the tent where we found you. What has become of her? Speak the truth, or—"

"Yes; me know," hissed Paquita, her superstitious fear vanishing before the mad jealousy that filled her bosom. "She white-face baby—she got love-weed in her mouth—when she speak. Garote got eyes only for her. He forget Paquita—tell white woman he love her—mus' hab her for him wife! He say dis, an' me hear him, but he nebber speak her so any more!"

"What do you mean—what have you done?" gasped Pablo.

"If you have dared to hurt her—"

"She no hurt any more," was the cold reply. "Me make her go die—me wait till all still, all sleep, den me creep to lodge—me git inside, take knife, an'—"

"You killed her—don't say that," faltered Don Leon, his strong frame weak and trembling as an infant.

"Me creep up so—she sleepin'—me stick her wid knife, hard as me kin—"

Pablo, with a groan of horror, sprung upon the exultant woman, and would have speedily avenged his sister, only for the prompt interference of Sandoval. During the momentary struggle, Paquita slipped past them and glided rapidly through the darkness. The comrades heard her steps, but searched for her in vain. A shrill, peculiar whistle from near the mouth of the pocket, closely followed by a loud shout, told them that Paquita had succeeded in rejoining her friends.

"Only for you her tongue would never have betrayed us," muttered Pablo, gloomily.

"She was a woman—though may God's curse rest forever upon her and hers if harm has come to our angel!"

"Maybe she lied—maybe Rosina is still alive. She was insensible when we found her—"

"I don't understand it—and we are penned up here, unable to do anything but wait—wait! when every moment seems a life-time of misery—oh, God!"

Pablo made no reply. He, too, felt the full force of their disagreeable situation. Beyond a doubt the enemy knew all now, and would be on the alert, so that an attempt to leave the pocket would be fatal. Not that life seemed so very dear to them now, but if for nothing else, they wished to live for vengeance.

Hour after hour rolled wearily on as they kept watch through the darkness, their weapons ready for use, but still no sign or sound of the enemy. Had they retreated? That was not probable, even if the savages had fled before. More likely they were lying in wait, hoping for their victims to walk blindly into their web.

And so through the weary night, until the sky grew grayer and the dim light of morning dawned upon them. Pale and haggard, yet sternly resolved, they lay behind a long boulder, peering down the defile. Presently Don Leon touched Pablo with his foot, and nodded significantly. His keen eye had detected a faint movement at some distance; the rustling of a bush. In breathless silence they awaited the result as moment after moment flew by.

Then—a dark, ugly face peered out from the leafy covert to be covered instantly with their weapons.

CHAPTER XV.

"CHECK!"

JACK RABBIT heard the words of the Prophetess, startling though they were, without a sign that could have betrayed her to the eager, angry eyes of the Mad Chief. He bowed his head to receive the scarf, then rode slowly back to the exultant borderer, Tony Chew.

During the rest of the visit Jack was unusually quiet. His thoughts were busy with the problems that grew more and more difficult every hour, until the solution seemed far beyond his ken.

Until now he had been willing to wait, hoping that some circumstance would turn up by which the crisis could be delayed until the four days stipulated for by Keoxa had passed. But now that the hour had been set, that everything had been arranged for the feast of blood, he realized to the full what an almost impossible task he had taken upon himself.

Remember the position of the buffalo-hunters; that they were outnumbered two to one by the Pawnees, who held the entrance to the trap, and without whose permission no one could leave the circular valley. Add to this, the buffalo-hunters seemed to place the utmost confidence in their dusky hosts, mingling with them for the most part almost totally unarmed, while Jack Rabbit, as a stranger and an American, was regarded with coldness, if not with suspicion. Would they even listen, if warned? He doubted.

"I'd show my good sense by riding away and washing my hands of the whole thing," he muttered, disgustedly.

Disgusted with the farce, Jack rode back to the valley, and

picketing out his horse, strolled moodily around the rocky barrier, while Tony Chew kept close at his heels.

As he came opposite the crevice in the wall, Jack's face brightened, and entering, he closely inspected the "pocket." Though plainly disappointed in finding it "no thoroughfare," he evidently considered the discovery of some importance.

"We could play 'em a pretty stiff game from here, old man Tony. And yet—is it worth the powder? We can't open the eyes of those fools, and will only get barbered ourselves without doing any good—by staying here. Now, I'm not more of a coward than most men, but, honestly, I don't fancy the idea of getting rubbed out for a parcel of strangers."

"You have forgotten what I told you, then," slowly spelled the dumb man.

"That my whole future depended upon our joining this train; good enough as far as it goes, but I don't like to work in the dark," muttered Jack, discontentedly.

"You must trust me in this," was the quick reply. "If all goes well I don't think you will repent. If the worst comes—well, they say that all things are made clear after death, and you will know, then, whether I was right or wrong. Only—mark my words. If you let a chance slip you of preserving these people, you will never forgive yourself, though you live to twice my age."

"You're a regular oracle, old man Tony, and just about as easily understood. However, for once you shall have your own way. We'll save these people—though just *how* puzzles me to guess—whether they will or no. Does that satisfy you?"

"There are few things you can do that wouldn't please me, dear boy," spelled Chew, a look of more than common love filling his eyes. "But I am glad that you trust me in this. You shall know all in time—but not now. We will need all our nerve, I fear, before we see our way clear."

"It's all a muddle to me. We can't hope to back the crowd down again—if we save our own hair 'twill be a wonder."

"We must work through *her*," replied Tony. "Since she has told you so much, she'll tell more. We must get the whole plan from her, then we'll mark out the part we are to play. You have a good lead there, if you only work it right. Hal speak of the—"

"Angel—just so, old man Tony, you're growing gallant in your old age," laughed Jack, yet with a flushed countenance, as they caught a glimpse of Mini Lusa passing before the mouth of the pocket.

"Don't lose a moment—learn all you can. I'll keep watch, and if the old man suspects anything, will keep him in play until you're through."

Scarce waiting to read the last word, Jack Rabbit left the cut and followed the trim figure of the Prophetess, who, as though ignorant of his proximity, glided rapidly on until the Pawnee lodges were nearly hidden behind the rocks. Then pausing, she turned and confronted Jack Rabbit.

The young borderer saw something in her face that checked the gallant speech he had already prepared, something that told him this interview, though purposely sought by her, had other and sterner matters to deal with.

"You are prompt," she said, quickly. "I am glad of it. There is little time for either of us to waste."

"My friend was right, then, when he said that you wished to see me?"

"Yes. I have been watching my chance, all day. But—you understood my words out yonder?"

"That I am in danger here—yes. But—I know it sounds rude—are you sure there is no mistake?"

"Sure—listen. You know that the sun will set to-night; I know, just as surely, that when the sun rises to-morrow morning, its light will shine down upon the dead bodies of you and your friends, unless you take my advice and flee while you can," earnestly declared Mini Lusa.

"If we were all marked for such a death, your friends would not let me pass beyond their lines, even if I would."

"They would not dare attempt to stop you while it is light, for fear of putting the buffalo-hunters upon their guard. You can escape now, but after sunset 'twill be too late."

"Wouldn't it look cowardly for us to desert these people, without even warning them of their danger? Would you advise a friend to do this?"

"Under the circumstances, yes. It is beyond your power to save them—by remaining you only add two more lives to the massacre. But enough. I have warned you for the last time. It is for you to decide now whether you will flee and live, remain and die."

"One moment, please. I can't find words to thank you for your kindness, now, but some day, if we both live, I can and will. Of this be sure, whether I live through to-night or die before the sun rises again, I can never forget you while life lasts."

"Fly, then—you are too—too young to die," faltered the maiden, shrinking back, her eyes drooping, her face suffused beneath his ardent gaze.

"Life is sweet—dearer now than when I first came here—but enough. This is no time for—for such thoughts. One more favor, please. When is the time set, what is the signal to be?"

"First there is to be a feast, afterward a dance. There is one point in the dance—our war-dance—where all the braves suddenly pause and bend their bows. To-night they will each one select a *living target*. He—my father—will arise and shake his lance, uttering his war-cry. *That* will be the signal," uttered Mini Lusa, in a low, monotonous tone, like that of a subject under magnetic influence.

"Thank you—be sure, whatever may happen, that I am very grateful—" began Jack, but with a low, inarticulate cry, Mini Lusa turned and darted away, leaving the young borderer staring after her in open-mouthed astonishment.

The remainder of the day passed away quietly. To the superficial observer the two parties would have appeared the best of friends. Even Raymon was light-hearted and joyous, for a scout had come in, bearing tidings of his two children. Their trail had been struck, and from that fact it was plain that they had outlived the perils of the storm. Immediately sending back word, the Pawnees had taken up the trail, promising soon to return with the young couple.

Whatever else they had decided upon, the two borderers had evidently resolved to see the play out, since they made no effort to leave the valley.

The sun sunk to rest, and the preparations for the great feast were concluded. The pale-faces, as a rule, partook heartily, but the Indians, for a wonder, when there was a chance for gorging themselves, ate but sparingly. As the Pawnee leader rather anxiously explained to the unsuspicious Raymon, the braves were reserving themselves for the dance.

Huge bonfires were built. The whites were seated in a group under the full glow. Beyond them the ground was prepared for the dance. A little to one side, a rude sort of throne was raised, affording seats for the Mad Chief and Mini Lusa.

Jack and Tony were with the other whites, like them, to all appearance unarmed. So were the Pawnees, though their weapons were piled near, ready for the last dance—the *dance of death*!

All unsuspecting of the impending peril, the buffalo-hunters, their wives and children, gayly applauded the active braves as they glided to and fro to the monotonous music. With significant glances, Jack and Tony drew near the rude throne, as the Pawnees armed themselves.

A suspicious glance greeted them, but Jack, with admirable coolness, began complimenting the chief upon the spectacle as the fated dance was begun.

"It makes me nervous, though," laughed Jack, "ever since my experience with the Kiowas. It came about in this way. A party of us mountain men, made a treaty with Blue Bull, and he invited us to a feast. Only our leader suspected anything wrong, and he dared not tell us for fear of being laughed at and thought timid. After the feast there was a dance. The weather was hot, and we soon cast aside our weapons and extra clothing, the better to enjoy the sport. You can hear what I say?"

The chief nodded, though with an uneasy air, his hand nervously grasping the spear which was planted beside him. What was the meaning of this story? was it only a coincidence?

"We didn't know it then, but we learned afterward, just how it all had been arranged. At a certain point in the dance Blue Bull was to arise and utter his war-cry, when his braves were to attack us—*hal you are ill?*"

The chief shook his head, with an effort controlling his emotion. He saw that the critical moment was at hand. Only two more changes, then he must give the signal.

"You started so I feared you were not feeling well. But my story. Blue Bull had a daughter, dear to him as the apple of his eye. Our chief knew this, and at the right moment he seized her—*just as my friend does now!*"

Jack grasped the chief's arm, his revolver at his breast, though hidden from the Pawnees, a movement strictly followed by Tony.

"*One motion—a single word, and we will kill you both!*" hissed Jack, in tones which could not be mistaken.

And the Pawnees were awaiting the signal.

CHAPTER XVI.

A PERILOUS TRAIL.

A DARK, ugly face set in a shaggy mat of hair, peering out from the clump of shrubbery, his little black eyes eagerly roving around in quest of the young hunters.

"Leave him to me," muttered Don Leon, bending his bow.

"Save your rifle in case they make a rush."

As he spoke the bow-string twanged sharply and the feathered shaft glanced through the air, its barbed point mangling the broad cheek of the cibolero instead of piercing his throat, as Sandoval intended. With a wild howl of rage and pain, the spy floundered back out of sight. As though in answer to his yell, a peculiar cry came from the mouth of the pocket, and the comrades knew, by the sound of his retreating footsteps, that the spy had been recalled.

"They know where to find us now; I guess they'll not keep us long in suspense," muttered Pablo.

"If we only knew what had really happened. About those Indians: they were Pawnees no doubt. What has become of them? If we only knew—"

"I'll crawl out and take a look—"

"No; they'll be on their guard against that. Our position is bad enough, without running any unnecessary risk. All we can do is to wait here until yonder gentlemen see fit to come and take us."

"Unless they take a notion to climb up above and roll rocks down upon us," laughed Pablo.

Don Leon made no reply, but his gaze was bent upon the high walls with close attention. The idle words of the young cibolero had suggested—if not an avenue of escape

least a better chance for life in the death-struggle which he felt assured must soon come.

For full forty feet the walls upon either side were bare and smooth almost as a ceiling. Then came what appeared to be a narrow ledge, or rather several disconnected projections. Upon this could be seen a number of good-sized bowlders, large enough to cover the body of a man; above this again, at irregular intervals, were ledges and points where an active, daring man might find foothold.

Though there were some objections to the plan, Don Leon knew that they would stand a better chance among the rocks than down in the pocket. At least the enemy could not reach them without first fully exposing themselves.

"Your head is worth two of mine, old fellow," cried Pablo, approvingly, as he heard the project. "I'd never have thought of that. Do you get to work, while I crawl out here to see that none of our friends are up to mischief."

Sandoval uncoiled the lasso from round his waist, while Raymon cautiously stole down the cut to see that none of the buffalo-hunters were near enough to frustrate this new plan.

Selecting a point of rocks, Sandoval easily cast his lasso around it, and after testing its firmness with all his strength, he grasped the cord and actively climbed up to the ledge. Then, preparing his bow, he motioned to Pablo, greatly to that youth's delight, for he had paid far more attention to the feat than to the defile beyond.

"Make a noose and stand in it; that will be the quickest way," said Don Leon, seeing how his rifle incumbered Pablo.

He was obeyed, and Raymon was quickly hauled up to the ledge. They peered out eagerly over the bowlders, but the bushes and rocks prevented them from sighting the enemy.

"Make haste," muttered Pablo. "Perhaps we can get clear beyond reach before those fools suspect anything."

The lasso was cast and a firm hold obtained; then as before Sandoval led the way to the second ledge. No sooner had he reached the point than he crouched down behind a bowlder, and cried out to Pablo to make haste. His agitation was explained by a loud yell from the mouth of the pocket. Some keen-eyed hunter had caught a glimpse of the young man, immediately giving the alarm.

"Hurry, Pablo," cried Don Leon. "They are coming—I can hear them running through the bushes."

The wisdom of the old adage—"make haste slowly"—had a good exemplification in this case. Pablo made the loop so insecurely that when half-way up to the ledge, the knot slipped, and he only saved himself from an awkward if not fatal fall, by dropping his rifle in order to cling to the rope with both hands. As Sandoval hesitated whether to risk lowering the lad, Pablo let loose the rope and dropped lightly to the rock, securing his weapon. In another moment he was again slowly ascending the wall, but the time lost bade fair to prove fatal.

The buffalo-hunters, led by Black Garote, broke out into full view below, and with angry yells, began to ply their bows, the feathered shafts clinking venomously against the rock, more than one of them drawing blood as they cut through the young hunter's clothing. Fortunately the wounds were none of them more than skin deep, and he did not lose his hold upon the rope.

Don Leon worked as he had never worked before, and drawing Pablo over the ledge, forcibly held him down behind a bowlder while hurriedly preparing his bow for a shot at the miscreants below. As he peered over the friendly rock an arrow whistle viciously past his face, grazing his ear, passing through his hair and then blunting its head against the wall beyond. Even this narrow escape was insufficient to unnerve the young man, and like an echo his bow-string twanged—a hoarse yell from the pocket below telling how true the shaft had sped. The next instant every living body had vanished from the dangerous spot below, seeking cover, only leaving the dying hunter lying there, the fatal arrow quivering in his throat.

"Careful, Pablo," cautioned Sandoval, as the young hunter, grasping his rifle, sought to catch a glimpse of the enemy. "The odds are too great for us to run any unnecessary risks."

"Hallo, senores!" called forth a loud voice, coming from the pocket. "It seems we have made a mistake."

"Glad you have found it out so early," laughed Leon. "Your eyes will be opened wider yet before all's ended."

"Come," said the voice, sharply; "between gentlemen, such a tone is out of place. You seem to forget that you are in my power, and that I have only to speak for you to die the death of a dog."

"What do you want, Black Garote? Speak plainly—don't try to pass yourself off for other than you are, a cowardly, treacherous, half-bred cur," cried Pablo.

A howl of fury broke from the cibolero, and a dozen or more arrows were discharged, but the two friends, securely sheltered behind the bowlder, could laugh at the spite displayed, as the weapons splintered against the rocks high above them. Pablo's hasty speech had another effect; it cut short the proposal Black Garote evidently intended to make.

A moment later a low whistle came from the mouth of the pocket, and in answer the buffalo-hunters adroitly stole down the defile, succeeding in passing beyond shot without once exposing their bodies to the aim of those above, greatly to Pablo's disgust.

"Look!" suddenly exclaimed Sandoval, pointing outward. "There's something fresh in the wind."

Above the tops of the undergrowth they could see two men

rush out in the valley; one was plainly Black Garote, the other as clearly an Indian. The conference was a short one, and evidently of a friendly nature, for the savage turned and uttered a loud cry, in answer to which nearly a dozen savages rode forward and mingled with the buffalo-hunters as though friends of lifelong standing.

"That looks black for us," muttered Sandoval. "If they combine they can make this place hot for us."

"We can make a good fight here, even if they come over the hill after us. But—wait a moment."

Pablo crawled cautiously along the ledge toward a peculiar depression which his roving eyes had noticed, and in another moment he disappeared from view. Don Leon waited anxiously, particularly as he saw the enemy, now numbering over thirty, securing their horses and starting out as though to scale the rocks, but, just as he was about to follow him, Pablo returned.

"I hoped I'd found a way out, but there's a break in the path that only a bird could cross. Only if we'd known it before, we could have reached this place without using the lasso the second time. There's a hole opening out on the ledge below."

The plans of Black Garote were quickly revealed. First sending two of his best men into the pocket, to keep the young hunters from changing their position, he divided the remainder and took to the hills. It was only a question of time and patience. From among the high crags, arrows or other missiles could be hurled down almost perpendicularly upon the ledge, when escape would be impossible. The comrades realized this danger, but could see no method of guarding against it, after Pablo had narrowly escaped death from two arrows as he peered down into the pocket to see if that avenue of escape had been left unguarded.

Occasional glimpses could be caught of the climbing figures, but far beyond arrow flight. Truly the prospect looked dark.

Darker yet when two Indians reached a point on the opposite wall from whence they could send their arrows down to the ledge, giving the friends a foretaste of what was to come.

"We can hide from them, anyhow," said Pablo, creeping along the trail he had discovered.

As they disappeared the savages set up a loud, warning cry. From their position they could see that the wall was divided, and evidently believed that their quarry was seeking safety in flight.

Such, at least, was the interpretation placed upon it by Leon, and crouching down, he held Pablo still. The yells were answered back from a dozen points, as well as from the pocket below. Sandoval's eyes glared as he heard this.

"If they only expose themselves! We will risk it. Do you take the left-hand one—use your bow and remember that our lives may depend upon it."

Disconnected as were the words, Pablo understood them, and their weapons were ready as they crept through the hole in the rock and reached the lower ledge unseen. Believing the warning of the Indians, the two buffalo-hunters had arose and were now standing out in full view, eagerly listening for something more to guide them.

With one sound the bow-strings twanged, and the unerring shafts sped home. Scarce waiting to note the result, Leon looped his lasso around the rock's point and glided down just as the Indians above discovered the movement. But they were too late to remedy their mistake, though their yells told the others what was transpiring.

Rushing past the still writhing bodies of the hunters, the comrades darted down the defile, and emerging from the pocket, quickly selected a horse each, then thundered down the valley, driving the others before them.

CHAPTER XVII.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

WHEN Black Garote let fall the tent flap, securely pinning it to the ground and his captive found herself alone, she sunk to the ground with a shuddering sigh of terror, though intensely relieved by being freed from his odious presence. Truly her prospects were dark enough.

She and her brother were captives in the hands of one who knew not the meaning of mercy. The only friendly person who knew of her position had been—as she believed—murdered. She knew that the cibolero was desperate and brutal enough to carry out his threats of torture unless she submitted to his will. What would be the end? The present was gloomy enough, but the future seemed even darker.

Her mind so sadly agitated, Rosina could not sleep, though her eyes had scarce closed in slumber since leaving the train so strangely. She cowered down close to the side of the tent furthest from the entrance, dreading lest, at every moment, it should open to give admittance to the loathed and feared half-breed.

And, in addition to all this, her thoughts would dwell upon the probable fate of her other friends and kindred. Had they been overpowered and massacred by their ruthless enemy? Her father, mother, and—dearer even than those loved ones—Leon Sandoval. With a low, moaning cry of agony Rosina bowed her head and covered her eyes in the vain hope of shutting out the horrible picture that swam before them in blood-red outlines.

A faint sound startled her; a low, rustling noise that seemed to issue from the ground beside her. The old fear came back, and she noiselessly drew her limbs together, a hunted light filling her eyes. A tiny crack was now visible in the skin wall, momentarily growing larger, and every nerve tingled with horror as she believed that Black Garote was seeking an entrance.

Shrinking back, one hand fell upon a short, heavy stick of wood, and with a vague idea of self-defense, Rosina grasped this weapon, raising it above her head.

The noise ceased. The triangular flap was cautiously raised and a moment later a dark figure crept into the lodge.

As the piece of skin fell back all was again dark. Yet, as though gifted with preternaturally acute vision, the maiden could follow the phantom-like shape as it stealthily crawled toward the rude pallet of skins. She saw it pause beside the couch, raise one arm, then heard the peculiar sound as a knife was driven with venomous force down through the skins.

What followed Rosina could never tell with distinctness. She was only conscious of springing forward and striking at the shadow with all the power she could summon, the club falling from her hands with the force of the blow.

Then came the wild alarm, mingling with a shrill scream as the shadow sunk helplessly across the pallet, and filled with horror at what she had done, the maiden sprung through the opening in the rear of the tent and fled up the valley with a speed lent by fear, little dreaming how narrowly she had escaped meeting with her brother and Leon.

Once, indeed, she paused, but the chorus of wild yells, so shrill and unearthly, more like the cries of famished wild beasts than sounds proceeding from the throats of human beings, banished the hope almost as soon as conceived. She knew that the ciboleros had been attacked by Indians—enemies of hers, as well. Turning again she fled through the night, little heeding whither she went, only thinking of leaving those horrible sounds far behind her.

Unheeding the sharp rocks that cut through and through her moccasins, scarce feeling the painful bruises that followed her frequent stumbles over or collisions with the ragged boulders that lurked in the darkness, Rosina fled on as fast as her trembling limbs would carry her, avoiding the moonlighted side of the valley lest it should betray her flight.

Once she stumbled over a boulder and fell with violence, her head striking against a rock with such force as to render her insensible. How long she lay in this state Rosina never knew, but when she awoke to consciousness a faint cry of horror broke from her lips, for she believed that all was lost—that her frantic struggle for freedom had come to naught.

Just within the edge of the shadows, yet clearly outlined against the bright moonlight beyond, were visible a number of men, who, with low, confused cries, were hastening directly toward the spot where she lay.

Ignorant that it was Black Garote's party in retreat before the Pawnees, rather than in pursuit of her, Rosina believed that she had been followed to this spot, and for the moment was utterly helpless. But then, as she recalled the terrible fate that awaited her were she recaptured by the brutal half-breed, her strength returned, and the maiden fled from the spot with speed lent by terror.

Fortunate was it for her that the buffalo-hunters had their hands full, their attention so entirely occupied by the Pawnees, else some one of their number would have caught sight of that fleeing form, have caught the sound of the hasty, incautious footsteps, over the rough, rock-strewn trail.

And then, driven on by a wild, unreasoning terror, the maiden fled along the valley, her limbs weak and trembling, her feet bruised and bleeding, seeing a threatening enemy in every shadow, in each startling, fantastic shape assumed by the bare, weather-beaten rocks.

Her brain throbbed painfully. A leaden weight seemed pressing down her eyelids. Almost unconsciously her pace slackened, and she deviated from a direct line, though still moving mechanically onward.

But as often, when it seemed as though she must sink to the ground, unable to crawl a single step further, would some sound—perhaps the distant howl of some prowling wolf, or the weird whispering of the night-winds through the ragged rocks and towering pinnacles—reawaken her terror, and almost feeling the terrible grasp of her enemy upon her shoulder, his hot breath upon her cheek, Rosina would resume her flight—on, on, through the night, over the rocks and boulders, on until the dull lethargy once more deadened the fancied sounds.

It was indeed a night of terror for the poor girl, none the less intense from its greatest perils being partly imaginary. Yet even terror at length ceased to have power to urge her on. Utterly exhausted, Rosina wearily looked around for some place of hiding.

Mechanically she left the valley and toiled up the hillside, looking for some hole, some crevice into which she might creep. Suddenly she came to the verge of what seemed a precipice. Her further progress in that direction was cut off. Wearily she sunk down upon the perilous verge—for the moment tempted to fling herself over into the black depth, as the easiest mode of escape from the perils that threatened. With this wild fancy she leaned forward and peered down the abyss.

Her weary eyes could not fathom the black depths. Yet a little exclamation—a glad cry—broke from her lips, and firmly grasping a sturdy shrub, she lowered herself over the edge of the pit.

Even through the gloom Rosina had caught sight of a little

niche, a cavity in the rock wall just beneath her, and she believed that here she could rest without fear, safe from discovery, however persistently the half-breed might search for his lost prey.

Sinking down in the little niche, resting against and upon the cool rock, Rosina was soon lost to consciousness. Yet despite—or possibly because of—her great fatigue, her rest was fitful, and broken by frequent starts and moans. Again she lived through the startling events of the past two days and nights; the savage attack, the mad race over the desert, the weary wandering, the strange meeting with the *tigrero*, the treacherous conduct of the half-breed cibolero, together with the trials that followed; all were renewed in her slumbers—seeming even more distinct and realistic than in waking hours.

Then came the flight—so weary, so hopeless—over the rough and tangled trail, on through the night, while the dreaded half-breed thundered behind in close pursuit. The sound of his footsteps came nearer and nearer, growing more and more distinct. She could feel his hot, foul breath streaming across her neck—could hear his voice, no longer hoarse and deep, but shrill, vibrating, unearthly, ringing in her ears like the knell of fate. One more despairing effort—a last, futile struggle—then she felt his heavy hand closing upon her bosom, pressing her down, down, with resistless force. Vainly she struggled—the iron hand pressed her down until she gasped for breath—until it seemed as though life must go out beneath that terrible, crushing weight. And then—she awoke.

She saw that the night had passed, that the opposite hill-tops were illumined by the rays of the morning sun. She was still lying in the little niche. Was it—had it all been a dream? A faint sigh parted her lips—a sigh of relief, as she believed this. But—

Again that shrill, unearthly sound—once more that crushing weight! Hal! God of mercy!

A flat, lance-shaped head suddenly reared itself before her eyes—a blood-red tongue darted rapidly in and out, playing before those brilliant, beadlike eyes—and the unearthly sound continued, now growing fainter and more soft, as the lance-shaped head gradually sunk down, as the evil eyes dulled and the red tongue played less nimbly, anon rising and swelling in volume until, to her particularly acute bearing the surrounding rocks seemed to tremble and quake as though shaken by a thunder-clap.

Then the weight seemed to gradually lift from her breast, that horrible sound to die away like the last breath of the mountain storm mournful and indescribably sweet, leaving only the sense of vision behind. Before her widely-dilated eyes danced those terribly beautiful orbs, undergoing marvelous transformations with every movement. Now receding, floating afar off, showing like tiny specks, like the heated points of needles, yet wonderfully brilliant, small as they were, containing all the prismatic hues of the rainbow. Again, they grew larger and more dazzling, glowing with a blood-red hue, coming so close that their heat seemed to pierce through her eyes, scorching, burning up her very brain. And the low, murmuring sound increased in like ratio. No longer soft and musical, it seemed the tramp of doom.

Then her mind seemed to give way before the terrible torture. Her eyes closed, her head drooped—Rosina had fainted.

Shrilly and loudly the serpent rattled. Its glittering head was thrown back. Its blood-red mouth was widely expanded. Its death-dealing fangs—so tiny, yet so horrible—were erected. And the maiden lay there helplessly at its mercy.

The shrill, vibrating rattle was answered back from a dozen points. Out of cracks and crevices, up from the foul-smelling abyss, crowded scores of the loathsome reptiles, as though eager to play a part in the sacrifice.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRIKING THE TRAIL.

It would require strong, biting words to picture the rage, chagrin and mortification of Black Garote, when he fairly realized how adroitly he had been baffled by the two young buffalo-hunters. In a word—he was “jest *more'n* red-hot!” Expressive, if not elegant.

There was a wild, reckless, headlong scramble among the half-breed's hunters and their copper-tinted allies, the Pawnees, as they leaped over the boulders or crevices, ceasing only when they had reached the level ground and saw the two men just disappearing from view through the mouth of the valley, driving all the spare animals before them.

It was then that Black Garote fully vindicated his right to claim the “cussin' championship.” His men drew silently aside, though keeping a watchful eye upon the infuriated hunter, knowing from long experience how ready his hand was to clasp and wield weapon. Paquita crouched down beside a boulder, her dark eyes anxiously, yet lovingly riveted upon the man who was all in all to her. The Pawnees were silently listening to a tall, lithe young brave, who was addressing them in low, earnest, but guarded tones.

Probably the reader has guessed why the Pawnees, from an attacking party, became allies of those whom they had so recently sought to slay.

The scouts dispatched by the Mad Chief to find Rosina and Pablo, had traced them to the camp of the buffalo-hun-

ters, and resolved to kill two birds with one stone; to take scalps, plunder and captives as well. But when the hunters retreated, the captives were missing, and Kingawee, with a wholesome fear of his master before his eyes, quickly effected a truce, explaining away his "mistake" with a grace worthy a professed diplomatist. As yet he had said nothing about his real purpose. Black Garote had believed—and made Kingawee believe—that Rosina was with Don Leon and Pablo. When Paquita rejoined him, thus had he interpreted her words.

But now he realized that there must be some mistake. He knew that neither of the young men would have abandoned Rosina—that they would have died stubbornly fighting first. And yet—where was she?

At this point he caught the woman's eyes. Something in her look caused him to start, but quickly recovering, he sprang to her side.

"You can tell me this," he said, roughly grasping her arm. "Was she with them in yonder?"

"No—the baby-face is gone—gone!" Paquita slowly replied; yet there was a glowing heat in her dark eyes that belied her calm speech.

"Gone—what do you mean, fool? Speak out—or—" and Black Garote nervously tapped the horn-hafted knife at his side.

"You will find her at the lodge. She is dead. I killed her. She would have stolen your love away from me, and so I—"

An angry howl burst from the half-breed's lips as he realized the full import of Paquita's words, and as if in obedience to a mad impulse, his right arm rose and fell.

An involuntary cry of horror broke from the lips of the buffalo-hunters, and one or two of them started forward as though to interfere. But if such were their intentions, it was too late.

The glittering blade descended full upon the half-breed's bosom of the Indian girl, and without a groan she fell forward, clasping the feet of her murderer with her bare, blood-stained arms.

For a moment Garote seemed stupefied by his own deed, but then as he heard the murmuring of his men, the wild, scared look vanished from his eyes, and he faced his followers, showing his teeth like an enraged wolf. Only that one glance was needed. The all-but-mutineers dropped their eyes and shrunk back, thoroughly cowed. After all, it was only a squaw—not worth a quarrel, particularly now that she was dead.

Black Garote harshly ordered his men back to camp. The Pawnees followed, led by Kingawee. The half-breed first entered the lodge, which the fight of the past night had left standing. He saw the knife still sticking in the pallet of skins—saw the blood-stained club—and then the truth flashed upon him. He felt sure that Rosina had taken alarm and had fled in the night, unobserved because of the confusion. Surely she could not flee far—it would be an easy matter to trace and find her. After all, he thought, it was as well that he had acted on impulse, just now. Paquita would have been an awkward "third person."

While thus engaged, Kingawee had not been idle. Still keeping his braves apart from their allies, his tongue had been nimbly at work. His task was not a difficult one, after all, since at the end of it was a fair prospect for plunder, to say the least.

"The rascals mean mischief, master," muttered an old grizzled hunter in Black Garote's ear. "They're not talking so much for nothing, be sure of that. If we only get rid—"

"Hist! cautioned the half-breed, as Kingawee suddenly approached them, as though suspecting the purport of their conversation. "But keep your eye open and your weapons ready."

"My brother looks around with a black eye," said Kingawee, speaking in the mongrel dialect which serves for intercourse along the south-western border the same purpose as the Chinook jargon does along the Columbia and its tributaries. "The two white-skinned boys have made fools of us all. Where are our horses? Gone—we are afoot in the desert!"

"Is it my fault?" sharply retorted Black Garote. "You have eyes as well as I. If we were made fools of, the Pawnees were not much wiser."

"The dust-cloud was big enough to fill all our eyes—red and white," and Kingawee smiled, grimly. "The two young braves were very smart—let them keep the horses, for they deserve them, and their people would hardly believe the story—of how they outwitted such braves as Strong Arm and his people—without some such proof. But of the poor Indian—what shall he say when he returns to his chief?"

"That's your affair, not mine," sullenly replied Garote.

"It may be; but listen. There is a great chief of the Pawnees—with the wolf-children his word is law. You may have heard the wind spirit breathe his name, when the storm-clouds are fighting. He is called the 'Mad Chief.'"

Black Garote started back, his dingy skin turning a shade paler. Kingawee smiled grimly as he noticed this change. He saw that Garote had heard of the Mad Chief, and that his task would be all the easier in consequence.

"Our master sent us, his children, out to search for two of his young friends. We found their trail. It ended here, where Strong Arm set up his lodge. One of those young friends has helped to ride away our horses; but the other? Where is the young squaw?"

"If you have eyes you can see—she's gone," angrily snarled the half-breed.

"Very good. Kingawee will go back and say: master, our

friend, Strong Arm, gave shelter to the squaw, but she ran away with the night. He is so sorry that he begs you will come and accept of his wooden horses, his blankets, his food and arms. And the great chief will come. He will say—it is good. This is better than a poor white squaw. Strong Arm is a good friend—too good for this poor country. And then, perhaps, the Great Spirit, who hears everything, will see how good these words are, and will take Strong Arm with him to the happy hunting-grounds."

The sensations of Black Garote while listening to this double-edged speech were anything but enviable. The thinly-veiled threat was plainly visible to him, and from what report said of the Mad Chief, the prospect of its being promptly carried out was far from doubtful. Yet he managed to conceal his whole fear, and to utter, in a steady tone:

"It is well. Kingawee shall go to his chief, but not without the young squaw. Her step is light, but it must leave a trail behind deep enough for the wolf-children to follow. He will go along to learn how a trail should be followed."

Whether Kingawee believed that his words had thoroughly cowed the half-breed or not, his actions would indicate as much. Turning aside he bade his braves scatter and search for the trail. Garote did the same, only motioned for Gil Perez—the grizzled hunter, whose warning has already been recorded—to keep beside him. And while apparently closely scrutinizing the ground, he hurriedly made his followers aware of the new complication.

"We must pretend to fall in with their plans," he muttered, cautiously. "We'll let them follow the trail, in advance, and when the right time comes, we'll show 'em our teeth. Bid the men watch me close. When they see me give the signal—either a knife-stroke or a bullet—they must follow suit. It must be a clean job—not one of the dogs must escape, else we will have that cursed Mad Chief down upon our backs. Go now—tell each one of the men; but be cautious. If they once suspect us—and that devil is cunning enough—our plan is spoiled and we're lost!"

Gil Perez nodded, then glided away. He was a cool, clear-witted fellow, and played his part admirably. Had not Black Garote given the instructions himself, he would never have suspected that anything beyond the common was going on between the old hunter and his different comrades.

Then a low cry from Kingawee announced that the trail left by Rosina had been found, and the entire party, red and white, flocked to the spot. In vain did Garote look for the signs pointed out by the Pawnee; his eyes were strangely dull for one who had gained such a reputation as a trailer. But neither were his men any better. And so, as a matter of course, the Indians were given the place of honor in front.

Possibly Kingawee had his suspicions. At any rate, he soon caused his braves to fall back and mingle with the whites, while he followed the trail, some yards in advance, alone.

Black Garote smiled grimly. He could bide the time.

While the trail continued up the valley, Kingawee had a comparatively easy task, but after some miles it wound among the rocks here and there, now lost, only to be found after many minutes of close, toilsome searching. At such times Kingawee would cause his braves to scatter upon each side, and soon one or another would find a clew.

At one of these balks, Black Garote passed hastily through his little band, and the hunters scattered, each eagerly scrutinizing the ground, queerly enough one man directly behind each savage. One rapid glance, then—

Black Garote leveled his rifle and fired.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PAWNEE'S PRIZE.

BLACK GAROTE had seen enough to convince him that Kingawee would be an awkward customer to handle, and so had determined to put him beyond the power of making trouble at the very outset. For this reason, that there might be no mistake, or failure, he selected the young Pawnee leader for his own game, and glided noiselessly up behind him, while Kingawee was busily employed in deciphering an intricate bit of the trail left by Rosina.

Though Black Garote muffled the click of his gun as thoroughly as possible, the faint sound did not escape the keen ears of Kingawee, who immediately confronted his treacherous ally. The one glance was sufficient. Even had he not seen the half-leveled rifle, with the half-breed's hand still upon the lock, Kingawee would have read the truth in those glowing eyes—eyes full of treachery and bloodthirstiness.

Though slightly disconcerted by this unlooked-for discovery, the half-breed did not lose his presence of mind. To hesitate now would be fatal. And flinging forward his rifle he fired the fatal signal.

Quick as were his movements those of Kingawee were no less rapid. With a backward leap, the Pawnee bent his body nearly double, and turned as though to grapple with the half-breed. The bullet, instead of piercing his heart, simply plowed its way through the muscles of his back, near the shoulder. Though the wound was more painful than dangerous, the shock benumbed Kingawee's left side so as to partially disable him.

He staggered and fell, bleeding freely. That momentary faintness probably saved his life, for Black Garote was springing forward with clubbed rifle, when he saw the Pawnee's

head droop and his form grow limp. Just then came the increased tumult as the death-struggle waxed more bitter, and Black Garote turned aside to aid his men, knowing how all-important it was that not one of Kingawee's party should escape to carry the tale of his treachery to the Mad Chief.

The half-breed's plans had been executed with tolerable fidelity. Each of his men had selected his victim, and all unsuspecting as the Indians were, it had been an easy matter to keep within sure striking-distance while waiting for the buffalo-hunter's signal.

When it came, the men were ready. Half a dozen rifles cracked, at such short distance that, in more than one case, the victim's skin was powder-burnt. Others of the buffalo-hunters leaped upon their men with drawn knives, striking home with relentless energy.

Completely taken by surprise, the Pawnees scarce realized the truth until four-fifths of their number were lying upon the ground, dead or dying. But then the survivors showed how thoroughly their past life of wild lawlessness, of living with every man's hands raised against them, had trained them, body and mind.

As though moved by one mind, the five unharmed braves leaped to a common center, each man stringing his bow with marvelous rapidity, fitting an arrow to the string and drawing them to their barbed heads, almost ere the buffalo-hunters realized that defense was about to be made.

The arrows were loosed—the feathered shafts sped upon their mission of death. A howl of rage broke from the hunters as three of their number went down in death, tearing and biting the flinty earth in their agony, spending their last breath in groans and curses.

Such was the sight that met the half-breed's eyes as he turned from the fallen Kingawee. Already the Pawnees were preparing for another shot, standing shoulder to shoulder, stern desperation written upon every feature—not one of the five flinching a hairbreadth from the heavy odds that confronted them—odds that were equivalent to death. They could not hope to stand up against more than one bold charge, even if that, guarded though they were in the rear by the upright wall of rocks. Die they must; yet they would perish true wolf-children—showing and using their teeth to the last.

Black Garote saw this—read their stern determination to fall fighting, since fall they must—and he saw, too, that it would not be wholly unavenged. Their firearms empty, his men could only depend upon their bows or knives in the charge, and must receive at least one more discharge of arrows before closing. At such short range, scarce a missile could fail to reach its mark, and he could ill afford to lose more men. Already he was terribly short-handed. Any further loss would almost assure the failure of his expedition, upon which his all depended.

All this flashed through the half-breed's mind in an instant's time, and as quickly came his resolve. His loud voice rung out, high above the groans of the dying:

"Down—to cover! and pick them off one by one!"

His orders were promptly obeyed; possibly with more alacrity than if he had commanded a charge. Like magic the buffalo-hunters sunk to the ground, each man crouching behind the nearest boulder, hurriedly preparing their weapons for use.

Though evidently not a little astonished by this display of prudence, the Pawnees were cool enough to see how greatly it lessened their chance—not of victory or escape, but of revenge, and though by so doing they were obliged to abandon their vantage-ground at the base of the huge rock, they darted for the nearest cover, closely imitating the movements of their enemies.

Black Garote uttered a curse of rage at this, but finished driving his bullet home, then cautiously peered from his covert. A blaze of fire seemed to sear his vision, and a little cry broke from his lips as he dodged back, presenting one hand to his forehead. When he withdrew it, it was covered with blood. An arrow had carried away part of his woolly eyebrows. And a moment later a sharp curse from his right told him that another chance had been seized upon by the Pawnees. Plainly enough the buffalo-hunters were not equal to the wolf-children in this phase of border fighting.

A little anxiously the half-breed turned his head, and found that Gil Perez was close beside him.

"Good! you can do it, old man," Garote muttered, with an air of satisfaction. "You must get around those devils, or they'll hold us here all day. Take whom you like—'Tonio and Crooked Hand will be best; take them and steal around until you can pick off some of the dogs. You can do it!"

Though the feat would be a truly perilous one—since he knew right well that were a single inch of his person shown to the Pawnees, at least one arrow would be sure to feel its texture, the veteran coolly nodded, then cautiously and adroitly backed from his position, uttering a signal that would tell the two men named just what was expected of them. Difficult as was the feat, it was performed in safety, and when beyond arrow-shot, the trio passed rapidly around in order to gain the coveted position.

The Pawnees divined their danger, and knowing that to remain quiescent would be to assure their death, quickly determined upon their course; one bold and daring as their whole life had been.

With one accord they leaped up from their coverts, and, with defiant yells, boldly charged the enemy in front. Taken by surprise, the buffalo-hunters discharged a hasty volley, which, more by good fortune than aught else, brought three

of the braves to the ground. The other two, each striking down a man, darted away at top speed. But the brief delay was fatal to them. Gil Perez and his comrades came up just in time to end the tragedy with their rifles.

The buffalo-hunters, infuriated by this loss, maddened by the taste of blood, vented their rage upon the still quivering bodies, hacking and hewing them out of all semblance to human shape, when Gil Perez suddenly uttered a furious curse, and pointed up the hill, where, dodging from boulder to boulder, his keen eye had caught sight of a dusky figure—an Indian.

Aroused from his half-swoon by the wild yell, the report of firearms and uproar of the last struggle, Kingawee had staggered to his feet, taking in the whole scene at a single glance. He saw that all was lost—that instant flight alone could save his life and insure him revenge, and had Gil Perez averted his eyes for five minutes longer, the Pawnee would have escaped scot-free.

Weak from loss of blood, his limbs unsteady and trembling, his head dizzy, Kingawee felt his heart sink as he heard the fierce yells of his bloodthirsty pursuers, and saw them scrambling frantically toward him, up the steep incline.

On he fled, nervously clutching the knife at his girdle—he only weapon he now possessed—hoping against hope. Possibly the loss of blood had weakened his spirit as well as body, for, though he felt that flight was useless, that in his present weak state he could not hope to distance his stanch pursuers, he could not bring himself to turn and stand at bay.

Nearer and nearer came the hunters, until already their arrows began to hurtle viciously around the fugitive, when Kingawee abruptly halted, a little cry of despair parting his lips. Before his feet yawned a deep, impassable chasm. To attempt to skirt it would throw him into the hands of the buffalo-hunters. All was lost!

With exultant cries the pursuers came on. To their surprise they saw Kingawee run along a few yards, then disappear from view. Only for a moment, however. Then he uprose, holding before his broad, blood-stained breast the struggling form of a maiden!

A cry of recognition burst from the half-breed as he beat down the leveled weapons of his men.

It was the form of Rosina Raymon!

"Back!" cried Kingawee, his voice ringing out in wild triumph. "Back! or the white squaw dies!"

His keen knife-point was pressed against the maiden's bosom. With a gasping moan, poor Rosina lost all consciousness of her terrible position.

"Harm her and I'll cut you into inch pieces," snarled Garote.

Kingawee laughed exultantly. He knew that he held the game in his own hands. Bidding the whites fall back, he leaped up from the ledge, still holding the maiden so as to shield his person. Then he dictated his terms.

Pointing to a distant point of rock, he said that he would give up the maiden, on condition that none of the party should attempt to follow him until he gained that position. If they refused he would drive his knife to the squaw's heart, and die fighting them while breath lasted.

Garote consulted in whispers with Gil Perez, then sullenly agreed to the proposal, since he could do nothing else. And then, still facing the enemy, Kingawee retreated, cool and cautious, careful not to throw away a chance.

Sullenly enough Black Garote watched him. It was a bitter blow, yet his cunning mind was not idle. The unforeseen error might yet be remedied.

The point of rocks was nearly reached when Kingawee was seen to falter, stagger back, then fall heavily upon his face!

CHAPTER XX.

JACK RABBIT "LOOMS UP, BIG."

And the Pawnees were awaiting the signal!

The tableau was an impressive one.

Cool and resolute, his plan thoroughly mapped, with implicit confidence in his comrade, Jack Rabbit had timed his story well, closely watching the progress of the dance, ready to act when the critical moment came.

At the first move of the selected change he did act. Standing close beside the old chief, he grasped him firmly by the right arm, thrusting a revolver muzzle against his breast, yet in such a manner that the truth could not be read by the dancers. At the same instant Tony Chew secured Mini Lusa in the same manner.

The change was complete, and as one man the Pawnee braves eagerly turned toward their chief, their eyes glowing, their nostrils dilated as though already scenting the bloody feast, their hands nervously clutching the ready weapons at their waists, while the unconscious spectators seated around clapped their hands and shouted in hearty praise of the unique performance.

"Speak one word—make a single motion—and you are a dead man!" hissed Jack Rabbit, pressing the threatening weapon still closer. "And not only you, but your daughter. Her life also rests upon your lips. If you dare give the signal, neither of you will live to hear it answered."

The chief turned his head and glanced toward Mini Lusa. He saw that the young borderer's words were true. The

dumb scout held the maiden's life at his finger-ends. No earthly power could prevent his carrying out the threat if driven to desperation.

Mini Lusa returned the glance with a pitiful, imploring look, as though begging him to have mercy. The Mad Chief read this glance aright, and Jack Rabbit felt the stout arm tremble in his grasp.

The warriors stared in mute amazement. Why was not the signal given? Could the chief have overlooked the indicated change? This seemed the only possible answer, and so, with wild cries and increasing clamor, they resumed their dance, two changes before the fatal one.

"Quick—you must give me your answer now—another minute will be too late. You see that we know all—that we are determined to save our friends from massacre, or else take you and your child down to death with us. Decide—quick!"

"I don't understand you—" hoarsely muttered the Mad Chief, his muscles suddenly growing rigid; but if he meditated a desperate stroke in hopes of redeeming himself, that hope was quickly crushed.

"Beware! think of her—your child!" grated Jack Rabbit. "Even if you could escape me, she is doomed. I have only to raise my voice and she dies. Take my warning—'tis well meant, and will be better for us all."

"What is it you want? I don't know what you mean."

"You do, well. You know—so do we—that this dance was to end in a massacre. You were to give the signal—a yell—at that point in the dance; then your braves were to attack the helpless whites. See! they are coming to the same change again. When they pause you must give them some answer. If the one they expect, then, by the God above you and your child die!"

"If this is so, what do you expect me to do?" sullenly replied the chief, seeing how helpless he was, even in the midst of his braves.

"Make them understand that you have changed your mind—anything, just so you don't give the signal, nor attempt to let them see the real reason. Now—they're waiting! Remember your daughter!" grated Jack Rabbit, his eyes glowing, his revolver pressing deep into the Mad Chief's side.

It was a bitter pill for the proud, haughty chief to swallow, but he saw that there was no other alternative—that he was entirely at the scout's mercy. True, a single cry would bring his braves to his aid—but only in time to avenge his death, not to save his life. Yet, had it been only himself, he would have risked everything, rather than tamely submit. But Mini Lusa—!

Again the Pawnees paused in their dance, looking eagerly, wonderingly at their chief. He turned toward them, but the expected signal was not uttered. Instead, in a low, cold tone he praised their efforts, then bade them seek the repose they had so thoroughly earned by their gallant and arduous efforts of the day.

Amazement was deeply imprinted upon every dusky face, as the braves listened. Slowly their bent bows relaxed and the arrows dropped unheeded to the ground. Their painted faces wore a perplexed and sullen look. But the Mad Chief's word was law; not one dared transgress it, nor even to murmur audibly their dissatisfaction.

"Are you satisfied?" muttered the chief, turning to Jack Rabbit, with a malignant look.

"Thus far—yes. It gives me some hopes that we can yet come to some arrangement agreeable to us both. Come—we can talk it all over as we walk, better than here, where it is so easy to be overheard."

The Mad Chief seemed inclined to rebel, evidently suspecting some fresh trouble beneath this proposal, but once more the threatening pistol pressing against his ribs brought him to terms. Sullenly, almost suffocating with rage and mortification, he accompanied the young borderer, moving slowly away from the ring of fires, following Tony Chew, who led the way with Mini Lusa.

Straight across the valley they passed, heading for the oft-mentioned pocket. The old chief made no resistance, did not even remonstrate, after he saw that the giant borderer was holding a knife-point to the heart of the maiden. His passionate love for her was the best safeguard the scouts could have had.

Entering the narrow crevice in the rock-wall, the scouts paused at a point from whence a fair view of the moon-lighted valley could be obtained, and thus assured against espial, Jack Rabbit lost little time in coming to the point.

"I suppose you would like to know our reasons for bringing you here; that is easy told. After what you told them, your braves will not dare molest us, unless they have your orders. Taking advantage of this, we mean to be far away from this before morning. You will soon be missed; some one will find you before you have time to suffer. Then, if you choose to follow us, good enough."

Turning to Tony Chew, Jack continued:

"Do you see to them, old man. You know what we have decided upon. At all risks they must be kept quiet and out of sight until the train is well out of this hole. If he tries any of his tricks, put your knife through him. You understand?"

The big scout nodded coolly, then Jack Rabbit turned and left the pocket eager to complete the work so well and boldly begun.

He paused at the line of the moonlight, and gazed keenly before him. The fires were still burning brightly, and the Indians were gathered in knots, evidently discussing the sud-

den and inexplicable change which had come over their chief. The buffalo-hunters had returned to their tents, and toward these Jack now hastened, seeking out the leader, Don Raymon.

"You have no news of—" began the buffalo-hunter.

"No—and what you believed the greatest misfortune, may, after all, turn out just the contrary. It was in hopes of their return that this feast was so long delayed—"

"They would have enjoyed it—especially poor Pablo."

"As much as we have seen—doubtless. Don Raymon, you are a wise and prudent man, I believe. You have been—are still in deadly peril, here. Only for a friendly warning which I received, not one of your party would now be alive. Hush! an alarm now would ruin everything!"

In a few rapid words, Jack Rabbit made known his discovery of the intended massacre, and how it had been happily averted.

"Our only chance is to leave this trap before the red-devils can suspect what we have done. I don't think they will dare molest us without the order from their chief. At any rate, we can do nothing else. You must prepare for the road; pass the word for every man to have his weapons within easy reach, but to guard against showing their distrust too plainly. We may have to fight, but I hope and trust not."

Startled and almost dismayed by this unexpected intelligence, Don Raymon could scarcely comprehend the whole extent of the danger they had so narrowly escaped. Yet he did not doubt the truth of Jack's story. It was too circumstantial for that.

With Jack as an aide, he spoke to each man, bidding them prepare for a night-march, telling them just enough to put them upon their guard. In this part of his work he was unconsciously assisted by the Pawnees, who, as soon as they noted the unusual stir, came forward to learn the cause. Their dark looks and sullen scowls opened the hunters' eyes more widely. They began to scent the mine over which they had been slumbering.

"Why are our white friends so uneasy?" demanded one of the eldest braves, of Don Raymon. "The wolf-children have keen ears and eyes that see far, even in the night-time, but they have neither seen nor heard the buffaloes."

"We are not going to hunt in the night-time," replied Raymon, as calmly as he could. "But my children do not come back, and I fear they are lost in the desert. We are going to look for them."

The savage laughed shortly as he pointed toward the carts and cattle, as though ridiculing the idea of following a trail with such aids.

"The great chief said, let our white friends wait. He never speaks foolish words. His face would be black were his braves to let his friends depart with empty hands, while he slept. You must wait until he speaks again."

"He has spoken," abruptly put in Jack Rabbit. "He knows everything. If he thinks it well that we should go, is a poor brave to say that his words are not good?"

The brave turned away, but with an angry look that boded them ill. And as he rejoined the Pawnees, a peculiar signal was passed from brave to brave. As if in obedience to it, the warriors, fully armed, took up their position before the mouth of the basin, effectually shutting the buffalo-hunters in.

"You see—we can't fight our way out!" gloomily uttered Raymon.

"How much better would it be to remain in here!" half-laughed Jack Rabbit. "Bid your men make haste. We must be miles away from here before daybreak!"

Suddenly a wild yell broke from the Pawnees, and several of them darted hastily forward. Guided by their action, the whites glanced toward the pocket. Two human figures were visible, just entering the moonlighted ground. The one light and graceful, the other tall, massive, a giant in size, whose long white hair and beard contrasted strangely with his half-nude, jet-black skin. There could be no mistaking either.

"God help us now!" gasped Don Raymon. "It is THE MAD CHIEF!"

Jack Rabbit laughed, recklessly, as he cocked his revolver.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WOMAN'S WIT.

ALL seemed lost. The Mad Chief uttered a wild yell as he was joined by the Pawnee braves. Slight hope was there for the buffalo-hunters now, maddened as he must be by the indignities which had been put upon him by the two scouts.

Their desperate case seemed to strengthen Don Raymon, if anything, for, in a clear, ringing voice he bade his men prepare for the struggle—to remember that they were fighting not only for themselves, but their dear ones, their wives and children.

With the cool desperation born of their critical position, the buffalo-hunters gathered around the rude carretas in which their women and children had sought refuge, silently facing the yelling, exulting foe.

The Pawnees seemed playing with their victims, as a cat does with a mouse. The bonfires had been replenished until, with the moonlight, all was clear and distinct as midday.

Gathered together before the one point by which the basin could be left, they appeared to be listening to the words of their chief, with enthusiastic cries and shouts.

"I don't understand it," muttered Jack Rabbit. "Tony would have died before he suffered them to escape, and we heard nothing of any struggle. I'll go and see what it all means, anyhow!"

And without listening to the eager remonstrance of the buffalo-hunter, Jack Rabbit glided rapidly toward the turbulent crowd of dusky warriors. As his approach was noted, several braves sprung toward him with angry yells; but the young scout never flinched, only drawing his pistols and cocking them.

His fate seemed sealed when Mini Lusa sprung forward interposing between him and the threatening braves.

"Back! he is the favored child of the Master of Life. The arm raised against him in anger shall be withered like the bough of a dead tree!"

At all times listened to with respect, the Prophetess now spoke in an unusually impressive tone, and the rash braves shrunk back in superstitious awe. Nor was this feeling lessened when they saw the Mad Chief—he whom they had considered impervious to fear or any influence other than his own fierce passions—glide forward, and sinking upon one knee, humbly bow his head over the hand of the young borderer, as though vowing fealty and submission.

Jack Rabbit started back in amazement, but the words which trembled upon his lips were fortunately drowned by the quick speech of the Prophetess.

"Children of the Great Wolf! open your ears and listen to the message which the Master of Life bids you receive through the lips of his daughter."

It was an impressive proof of the remarkable influence which Mini Lusa had gained over that wild, turbulent band, that at her first words instantly all became still; weapons were lowered, angry scowls gave place to looks of deep attention.

"The Master of Life has spoken to his child and his words are very bitter. He says that his chosen children are growing careless and forgetful; they no longer remember his sacred command, 'Raise not your hand in anger against your brother who places trust in your friendship.' This is his order, and while the wolf-children obeyed, his face was clear and his heart soft toward them. But they have forgotten. They have made friends with the pale-faced hunters with their tongues, while their hearts were filled with hatred; they have lured them into a trap, have feasted them, danced for them, called them brothers, gave them one hand in friendship while the other held a bloody weapon behind their backs. The Master of Life has seen this, and he is very angry. He says: 'If my chosen children are so false, in whom can I place any trust?' He is very angry, but he could not bring himself to destroy his loved children without giving them one chance to repent. He put his hand upon the heart of our chief and softened it so that he could not speak the word of death; he blew away the dark cloud that had covered the Black Tiger's eyes. He led him aside and spoke into his ears the words which I have repeated to you. He bade him let the pale-faces depart in peace, only asking a promise that they never more venture into the land of the Great Wolf."

Mini Lusa paused, glancing around upon her audience with outward calm, but really strongly agitated heart. It was a bold stand she had taken, but would it prove successful?

As her speech progressed the brows of the Pawnees gradually lowered. The words were very bitter to them. It was hard to lose the bloody but delicious morsel with which they had so long been coquetting. Swift glances were interchanged, the meaning of which was plain enough, but none seemed bold enough to accept the position until one, the old brave who had spoken so sharply to Don Raymon, obeyed the mute appeal of his fellows and stepped boldly forward.

"The Prophetess has spoken, and the wolf-children have listened with all their ears. She is very wise, and the Master of Life has called her his child. But still she is young and a squaw. She may have misunderstood his words, since he spoke to Black Tiger, not to her. The chief has a tongue; let him speak and tell his children what the Great Spirit really did say."

A murmur of approval ran around the dusky circle as the Crow spoke, and all eyes were turned upon the Black Chief, who still stood before the young borderer. But before he could have replied Mini Lusa spoke, sharply:

"You have heard the message. The Master of Life is not a dog, that his words need be repeated more than once. It is your duty to obey, and without asking is this or that for the best?"

"Let our chief speak and we will obey, in silence. But while he is near, the words of a squaw go in at one ear and out at the other," stubbornly retorted the Crow.

"Then take his answer!" cried the Prophetess, springing to one side and waving her ornamented wand with an angry air.

A streak of flame seemed to shoot through the air; then, with a horrible death screech, the Pawnee flung aloft his arms and fell heavily backward, a tomahawk sunk to the very eye in his shattered skull. Leaping forward Black Tiger placed one foot upon the quivering corpse and wrenching the weapon from its ghastly sheath, glanced sternly around upon the mute, awe-stricken band.

Like a flock of frightened sheep the savages started back, not knowing where the insane anger of the chief might carry him. And in that moment the victory was won.

"You have saved our lives once again," muttered Jack

Rabbit, so close to Mini Lusa's ear that his breath fanned her cheek. "Only you could have done it. How can I thank you?"

"By making the best of your way from here. Hurry up your friends—tell them that more than life depends upon their diligence. The trail is open for them now, but how long 'twill remain open God only knows."

"They are nearly ready. They realize the full extent of their danger now. But I must speak of yourself. This bold ruse—I know it was yours, for we had scarcely dared think of it, since my friend cannot speak. How will it end—what will your fate be, when they find out the part you have played—as they must, soon?"

"What matter—I am only a poor squaw—at any rate, you and your friends will be safe."

As she spoke there was a strange, trembling cadence to her voice that she in vain sought to hide. But the quick ear of Jack Rabbit read the truth, and he replied, eagerly:

"It does matter—so much that I shall not leave you to bear the consequences alone. Mini, darling, you must know that I love you—I could not have hidden it had I tried. I know it has only been a few hours since we first met—under other circumstances I might not have spoken so soon; but you have shown an interest in me that gives me hopes—hopes that you do love me a little. Am I wrong, darling?"

"Is this a time for such words?" she said, reproachfully.

"It may be the only time left us for anything, and I wish you to know my whole heart in case anything happens to me to-night. You know the danger we are in—if they should detect our trick—nothing could save us from massacre. Then tell me—could you ever learn to love me?"

"Not learn—no—," faltered the Prophetess; but her face revealed far more, and with a joyous cry, Jack Rabbit sought to clasp her to his breast.

Mini Lusa however eluded him, with a significant gesture toward the Pawnees. Jack, though with a rueful look, realized how fatal such an exhibition would be, and managed to control his ecstasies.

"Then you will be with us—we will leave this place forever?"

"No, I can't leave him. I am all in all to him now, and you must not ask it. There—no more. Think of me sometimes, as I shall of you. And now, good-by!"

With these words she glided swiftly away, quickly disappearing among the group of savages, where under the circumstances, he dared not follow her. At that moment he who had thus far so successfully impersonated the Mad Chief, drew near him, with a peculiar gesture.

"You fooled even me, old man," softly laughed Jack. "I was ready to send you a blue bill, at the first chance. But see! the carts are nearly ready for the trail. If we can only pass the fire yonder, without coming to blows! But I'm dubious—it has all worked too smoothly in our favor from the first stroke for it to last the deal through."

Tony Chew's hands moved swiftly for a few moments.

"The lesson you gave them may answer, but if you could only imitate his voice as well! However, that can't be helped. We must risk your horse, too. Wait here for me."

Jack hastened away to bring up their horses, as the train was now ready for the road. The counterfeit chief saw that several of the Pawnees were approaching him, and though he clutched a revolver hidden in his girdle, he dared not attempt to avoid them. They paused before him, and spoke, humbly enough, but Tony scowled darkly upon them and with an angry gesture, turned shortly away, just as Jack came hastily up, and sprung into the saddle.

The train passed quickly out of the basin, none of the savages venturing to raise a finger to stay them, though black looks were upon every side. The two scouts hung behind, Jack looking for Mini Lusa, who had so suddenly vanished. Tony grew more and more uneasy as he noted the change that was gradually creeping over the Pawnees. Already a murmur of dissatisfaction was becoming audible. But Jack had eyes, ears for nothing save the one thing—he must find the Prophetess.

A hoarse, bellowing roar rather than yell—a shrill, piercing scream; then two figures darted out from the pocket.

"Death and furies!" howled Jack Rabbit. "That devil has broken loose!"

"Stop her—kill her if she don't stop!" yelled the escaped chief, as the light-footed Prophetess eluded his grasp.

"You hear—they'll murder her!" grated the young borderer. "Go—save yourself, old man. As for me—I'll save her or die with her!"

Striking right and left at the crowding savages, Jack urged his horse toward the fugitive, shouting aloud her name. Close beside him kept the faithful scout, nobly seconding his exertions. Mini was lifted up before Jack, but then—The infuriated savages close in from every side. They were surrounded. Flight was impossible.

CHAPTER XXII.

RUN TO EARTH.

WHEN Don Leon Sandoval and Pablo Raymon made their adroit coup; they rode rapidly on along the line of rocks, keeping the extra animals well before them, thus at one blow

dismounting their enemies and preventing what would otherwise have been a dangerous pursuit. Nor did they slacken speed until the last red-skin was lost to view.

"Pablo," cried Sandoval, abruptly, reining in his horse, "I've run far enough. You can keep along the edge of these rocks, and 'twill guide you to the train. Make haste and tell them all that has occurred. If I know your father aright, he will never know rest until he has bitterly avenged poor—"

The young man could not speak the name. There was a painful choking in his throat, and his voice grew husky and uncertain as he thought of his loved one.

"And you?" asked Pablo, quickly.

"I am going back. Do you think I could wait, even for an hour? No—while one of those devils live I'll never leave the trail, never know rest nor quiet until she—my poor Rosina is fully avenged!" hoarsely replied Sandoval.

"The duty is mine as well as yours, Leon—we will not part. I am only a boy in years, but I've done a man's work more than once, and I can do it again."

In silence the friends clasped hands, then rode on, quietly discussing their plans. These were simple enough. A resolve to skulk around Black Garote's band, dealing a deadly blow for vengeance whenever opportunity offered. Strangely enough, neither of them doubted the truth of the words spoken by the Indian woman. They believed that Rosina had indeed been murdered.

They lashed the loose horses, yelling and hooting at them until they were nearly mad with terror, fleeing in every direction; and then, satisfied that it would be days before the enemy could collect them, the comrades entered a defile, winding through the rugged, broken hills for several miles. Then, in a little basin-like valley, where a bubbling spring kept nearly an acre of ground green and fertile, they dismounted, turning their animals loose, hoping to find them near at hand in case occasion should require.

Two hours later they were peering down from a rocky covert upon the camp of the buffalo-hunters. The spot seemed deserted by every living being. Satisfied at length that this quietude concealed no more, they descended and explored the camp.

"Instead of following us, they have gone up this way—up the hollow," muttered Don Leon, his well-trained eye reading the signs which would have baffled many a fair scout. "I don't understand it! Can it be that—?"

He did not finish the query. The hope seemed too wild—too improbable for utterance. Yet it had taken root, after all.

Their resolution was quickly taken. They would trail the trailers, even though sure that Black Garote would return in due time to his wagons. But anything was better than inactivity.

Their task was much more easy than that of Kingawee. Little dreaming of pursuit, the allies had left behind them a plain, distinct trail. And so, advancing almost at a run, the two scouts rapidly overhauled them, while still keeping a good look-out, not to run their necks into a noose.

Suddenly the sound of firearms came to their ears, from beyond a high point of rocks. If their game, then the trail had made an abrupt bend. After a moment's doubt, the comrades darted forward, eagerly scaling the high, ragged hill.

"Look! Mother of God! can it be?" gasped Don Leon, sinking to the ground, faint and trembling, pointing across to the opposite hill.

"It is—Rosina!"

The scene was enough to startle them. It was just when Kingawee confronted Black Garote and his bloodthirsty followers, holding a knife at the maiden's heart, threatening her death unless they made for him a free passage to the point of rocks—turning and indicating the huge boulder beside which the two scouts were crouching.

This action recalled Pablo to his senses, and, instead of rushing madly down the hill as he was on the point of doing, he knelt down beside the pale, speechless lover.

They saw that the savage had gained his point, and with painfully-throbbing hearts watched him as he slowly made his way over the rocks toward their covert. Wholly unsuspecting of danger in front, he kept a close watch upon Black Garote's party, knowing that if a chance offered, a treacherous shot would change his triumph into death.

"Pablo," muttered Don Leon, as Kingawee drew nearer and the party beyond began to prepare for a sudden rush, "that devil means mischief. He'll—he'll use his knife rather than lose her! Your hand is the steadiest now. Watch your chance and—"

His words were drowned by the sharp crack of the young buffalo-hunter's rifle, and with wildly-throbbing heart he leaped up just in time to see Kingawee fall to the earth, corpse.

With a glad cry he bounded forward, and in another moment had Rosina clasped tightly to his breast, raining passionate kisses upon her pale lips, forgetful of all save that the dead one for whom he had mourned was alive.

It was fortunate that Pablo had his emotions under a little more control. As Don Leon passed by him he heard the distant yell of the buffalo-hunters—a shout of wondering surprise, quickly followed by another, more shrill and vindictive; and he knew that they were recognized by Black Garote's band.

"They know us now, and won't let us slip so easy again. See! they're coming—we must run for it!" he hurriedly cried, as the party, led by the howling half-breed, dashed recklessly over the rocks and crevices toward them.

Awakened from their moment of almost perfect bliss the lovers separated from each other's arms and glanced hurriedly around. Rosina caught sight of the half-breed, who was in advance of his men, yelling and foaming at the mouth like a madman. A thrill of utter loathing and dread agitated her form as she gasped:

"Save me—from him! I would sooner die than fall into his hands again!"

"That shall never be, while we live, darling!" earnestly breathed Sandoval, as he wound an arm around her waist and half-carried her up the hill to the big rocks.

A single glance told them that to pause here would be fatal, since two men could not defend the boulder against a dozen. They must flee, if not hoping to escape entirely, then until a better spot for standing at bay could be found. And down the hill they hastened, the scouts aiding Rosina as much as lay in their power.

The valley was gained, and they hastened up the valley, hoping to round the point before Black Garote could sight them. But vain were their hopes. Worn with strong emotion, fatigue and lack of food, the maiden soon began to falter and her feet to grow heavy despite the strong arms which supported her. And then the wild shout from the ridge-top told but too plainly that they were discovered.

"We must stand and fight them," grated Pablo. "They're not more than a dozen—"

"And here's the place!" cried Sandoval, joyously, abruptly turning aside and scrambling up a few yards of the hillside. "We can fight them here."

The spot was a peculiar one to be met with in that lone, desolate section. It would seem that the hand of man had been at work—had hewn a passage through the solid rock some ten yards in length, direct into the hill. At the further end was just visible a small hole, nearly hidden from view by the vines which clambered up the sides of the cut. A plummet dropped from the upper edge of the cut, would fall full two yards in front of the hole. Thus the cave or den could only be approached or commanded from directly in front.

Sandoval plunged into the hole first, with ready knife and pistol, lest it should prove to be the lair of some wild beast; but his fears were without foundation. And in another minute Rosina was crouching down in a secure corner, while the two borderers knelt beside the opening with ready weapons, feeling sure that their retreat would not be overlooked by the enemy.

"Ready—make sure of the half-breed!" muttered Sandoval, as the rapid trampling of feet was heard, and the next moment the excited buffalo-hunters rushed into the cut.

Whether from accident or choice can only be surmised, but Black Garote was not among the foremost men, though the comrades both retained their fire until the leaders fairly outstretched their hands to tear aside the leafy drapery, hoping to forever dispose of the ruffian. But then the rifle cracked and the stout bow twanged. As though hurled back by some mighty ocean wave, the buffalo-hunters fled, leaving two of their number lying upon the blood-stained rocks quivering in the agonies of death.

From without came the harsh voice of the half-breed, cursing his men for their cowardice, though he certainly did not seem anxious to set them a better example.

Despite their natural suspense, the scouts could not help casting occasional glances of curiosity around them, but the darkness within effectually baffled them. Then Pablo ventured to leave his post, as all was now still without, and carefully made the circuit of the den, examining the walls as high as he could reach.

His report was not very cheering. The cave was small, but more than ten feet broad by twenty in depth, and of no great height. The walls were smooth, with very few and slight projections; the floor was very similar. It all amounted to this: their only hope of escape lay in their defeating the besiegers before hunger and thirst should compel them to succumb.

"Hold! within there!" at this juncture shouted a loud, coarse voice, which both men recognized.

"We are within—why don't you come, too?" retorted Pablo, after a moment's pause.

"In good time, young cock. 'Twill not be so pleasant when I do come, unless you have sense enough to agree to my proposal," quickly added Black Garote.

"Any proposal from a gentleman of your standing must be amusing as well as valuable. Pray, let us hear it."

"You laugh now; how will it be after a couple of days' starvation? Will you be as saucy then?"

"We will dance over your grave long before that, nigger!" recklessly laughed the young buffalo-hunter.

"You can gain nothing by taunting him, Pablo," whispered Sandoval. "Better let him finish. It may give us an—"

"Only for her, I'd leave you to your fate, boy," snarled the half-blood, his voice husky with rage. "You are not always such an idiot. You can understand reason, if you try. Will you listen to my offer?"

"Yes; go on, only make short work of it."

"I offer her—your sister—life and freedom. I pledge you my word to send her to her father. As for you—we will withdraw to the hilltop yonder, and then give you half an hour's law. After that we'll take your trail. If you refuse, then we'll starve you out."

"A very flimsy move, Black Garote," quietly replied Sandoval. "Your proposal is a lie throughout. We are not quite foolish enough to believe you."

"You refuse, then?" with an angry snarl.

"Certainly we refuse. Do your worst. We defy you and yours."

"Then you shall die like rats in a hole!" was the furious reply.

The next moment several goodly-sized bowlders came crashing down into the cut, from above. And high above the sound of this fall came the voice of the half-blood, madly urging his men on with their diabolical work.

"God help us! they mean to block us in!"

"Better that than to fall into *his* power," murmured Rosina, creeping to their side. "At least we can die together."

"As for us, we are strong and can bear it; but you—my darling—it is horrible!" huskily uttered Sandoval.

"It would be, were I alone, but with you—"

The sentence was never completed.

A yell of alarm, arising even above the noise of falling bowlders, came from without, followed by a strange crackling sound; and the very mountains seemed to tremble and groan, to quake and shiver as with coming dissolution.

And then, with a roar as of an avalanche, the enormous mass of rock which projected over the cave-entrance slowly slid down, filling the cut entirely, lying before the cave in a mass that a thousand men could not budge!

The three friends were entombed alive!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MASSACRE.

DON RAYMON, his eyes fairly opened to the deadly snare that had well-nigh closed forever upon him and his, urged his men to all possible haste, and the sharp cracking of cowhide whips sounded even above the horrible, unearthly screeching of the rapidly-revolving wooden wheels. The hunters plied their weapons industriously, but the slow-footed oxen and sluggish mules were veterans in the service, and were not to be hurried into a run.

Fearful lest each coming moment should bring with it the wild signal that the Pawnees had broken through all restraint, Don Raymon kept close along the base of the rock-line, where, in case of necessity, they could fight without fear of being entirely surrounded. And so, the discordant creaking marking their progress, they had placed nearly a mile between them and the basin when the wild yell of the Mad Chief surprised the two scouts, and even floated across the sandy waste to warn the buffalo-hunter that his worst fears were realized. And the distant, yet tolerably distinct sound of pistol-shots, yells and shouts only confirmed the fear.

For a moment Don Raymon appeared totally unmanned. The hand of misfortune was falling fast and heavily upon him, and it was but natural that he should flinch. First Rosina and Pablo; now his wife. It seemed very hard.

"We cannot run from them, captain," quietly observed a grizzled veteran. "We must fight. They showed us how they make war in play; it's our turn to be in earnest."

"Right, Antone; I was thinking of the poor women. But they have hearts of men if the arms of women, and will not fear to share our fate, be it good or evil. To the high rock-wall yonder, lively!"

Under his and the exertions of Antone, the carts were hastily drawn up before the perpendicular mass of rock in the shape of a crescent.

"Hark!" muttered Antone in his leader's ear, "the devils are daring enough. They're not afraid to let us know they're coming."

"All that come will not return," was the quiet reply.

Louder and more distinct sounded the yells and hoots of the Pawnees, as, led by the infuriated Black Tiger, they rushed along the deep-imprinted trail on foot. From this, his dread lest his prey should escape him can be imagined, since the Pawnees are essentially horse Indians.

"You hear the wolves, my men," cried Don Raymon, in a clear, distinct voice. "They come thirsting for your blood. They have no thought of mercy. We must conquer or die—and not alone ourselves, but our wives and children. Remember them, and let the thought nerve your arms to strike hard and sure. Better to die together, fighting like men, than to surrender to perish by tortures the most horrible. Fight, then—fight while a breath lasts!"

A low, determined cheer followed this brief speech, and Don Raymon knew that he could strongly depend upon his men. And then he busied himself with strengthening the barricade as thoroughly as possible.

A deafening yell from the Pawnees now proclaimed that they had sighted the train; then all was still save for the muffled-sound of many feet trampling swiftly over the loose sand. The suspense was brief. There was no delay, no thought of cautious approach where the Mad Chief led—least of all now.

With the deep, bellowing roar that had carried terror and dismay full often to the hearts of his enemies, he bounded high into the air, fairly clearing one of the carts, alighting in the midst of the buffalo-hunters, plying both knife and hatchet with a skill and deadly execution peculiarly his own.

Yelling shrilly, intoxicated as it were, with the promised feast of blood, the Pawnees followed their leader's example with a reckless daring and indifference to the bullets and arrows of the buffalo-hunters rarely displayed by Indians, unless

their numbers are greatly superior. Over the clumsy carts they scrambled, parrying the thrusts and blows with knife or hatchet, then peeling forth their mad war-cry, leaped down among the buffalo-hunters, to kill or be killed.

Led by Don Raymon, the hunters fought desperately, knowing that they must conquer or die, knowing that upon their success or defeat depended the lives of their dear ones, their wives and babes. There was no thought of giving or asking quarter. 'Twas a duel to the death—a death-grapple of infuriated wild beasts rather than of men.

The report of firearms grew less frequent, then ceased entirely. The twanging of bowstrings were no longer to be heard. There was the clash of steel, the sickening thuds as rifle-butt or heavy hatchet alighted with crushing force. The thrilling, unearthly war-cries were hushed now. Breath was far too precious for such waste. Only the labored breathing, the deep curse, or involuntary cry, husky and stifled, that told of some sore wound—mayhap a death-blow. The feeble groans of some dying wretch, wrung from his paling lips by the recklessly trampling feet of friend and foes as they close and struggle for the mastery. With now and then a short, piercing shriek from woman's lips, telling of a yet more sickening tragedy, or the terrified wail of an infant; such were the sights and the sounds which the pale moon looked down upon as it sailed through the cloudless sky.

The star of the buffalo-hunters was rapidly setting—going down in a cloud of blood. Though fighting stubbornly, they were outnumbered, and the cries of their dear ones too often distracted their attention. Back across the little corral they were forced, until the rock wall prevented further retreat. And there King Death reigned triumphant.

The Mad Chief more than justified his terrible reputation. Wherever he moved, blood ran free as water. His huge war-club, thickly studded with short, stout knife-blades, broke through the stoutest guard, crashing down through bone and cartilage, carrying death swift and sure.

Three several times did he force his way to almost arm's length of Don Raymon, but as often did a rush of combatants force them asunder. He seemed to be fighting with but one object, and at length fate favored him. The leaders stood face to face.

With a wolfish snarl the Mad Chief dropped his blood-dripping weapon and sprung upon Raymon with his naked hands, unheeding the long knife that buried its length in his shoulder.

"Mine—mine at last!" he snarled, as his arms closed around the buffalo-hunter with an enormous pressure, holding him helpless as an infant.

A brief, desperate struggle; then the white man's form grew limp, his head drooped and he lay helplessly at the mercy of his deadliest foe.

The hunters missed that stout, ringing voice, and as their numbers grew rapidly less, despair seized upon the survivors. Their blows became more feeble and less frequent. Instead of a stubbornly-contested fight, it now became a brutal, merciless massacre.

Black Tiger took no part in it, save now and then to add his voice to the devilish chorus. He carried the insensible Spaniard out from the corral, and flung him, securely bound, upon the sand. Then he returned and sought out a certain wagon, in which crouched a terror-stricken woman. It was Senora Raymon. Then, crouching over the forms of husband and wife, Black Tiger watched the closing scenes of the revolting tragedy.

There were few captives taken; at the most scarce half a dozen besides the two specially claimed by Black Tiger, and these, with one exception, were women. Old Antone, bleeding from a score of wounds, had earned the respect of the Pawnees by his desperate bravery and stubborn resistance. For that reason had he been spared an immediate death. So great a brave would do justice to the painted post!

The carts were hastily plundered, being gutted of everything—clothing, skins, food, and merchandise. Then they were rudely hacked to pieces and the torch applied. Thoroughly sun-dried, saturated with grease, the wood caught easily, and in ten minutes the red flame was mounting high up to the heavens. The savages danced madly before the blazing heap—the funeral pyre for their own dead as well as of the slaughtered hunters.

Black Tiger put an end to the orgies before many minutes. Dragging with them their wretched captives, the victorious savages returned to the basin loaded down with plunder.

Raymon and his wife were thrust into one of the lodges, but were not left long alone. Black Tiger soon returned, and thrusting a torch into the ground, crouched down before his captives, where the full light fell upon his face. Raymon started. Though he had suspected as much, this was the first time that he had seen the chief unmasked. The disfiguring paint washed away, Black Tiger proved to be a full-blooded white man.

"You look startled, my friend," he uttered, in a low, strangely soft voice. "Did you believe me an Indian? Well, I am one, in all but color—and you made me such! Ay! I am not dreaming. You made me what I am; you and your wife, yonder."

As he spoke, a gray shade crept over the hunter's face, and a strange look of terror filled his eyes.

Black Tiger laughed harshly as his keen eye noted these symptoms of awakened memory. Then he resumed:

"Yes—you made me what I am; but 'tis my turn now. For years I have waited—waited until it seemed that hatred and impatience would eat out my heart. For years I lost

sight of you, though I hunted night and day for your trail. And now—to think that we should meet at last, by accident! Is it not strange? We meet by accident—and the result is—let me tell you.

"I recognized you from the first, though time has changed you not a little. I knew you, and from that moment you became mine—body and soul. Your fate was decided upon years ago. Why have I played with you so long? Well, your death alone would not satisfy me. You must suffer, first. I would kill you by inches—torture you until you prayed for death. How could I do that better than through your children? That is my reason for sending in pursuit of them, and keeping you in play. I had decided that the boy should die of slow torture, before your eyes. As for the girl—her share in the play is still easier guessed. As for Juanita—'tis not the first time my lips have pronounced the name! As for your wife—you shall see her become the Indian wife of Black Tiger—of the Mad Chief; and then you shall be united—in death!"

"Devil!" gasped Raymon, vainly struggling with his bonds.

"Ay! devil—and who made me such? Who but you—and your wife, yonder! Until then was I not a true, honest man? Only I was poor—a poor hunter, such as you are now. That was my only sin—that, and my daring to love such a fine lady."

"God of mercy! can it be that you are—"

"I am Ruez Arroyal—yes!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT BAY.

HEMMED in upon every side—surrounded by a score of bloodthirsty savages; such was the perilous position of the two scouts. Death seemed inevitable, yet neither of them flinched or lost heart before the heavy odds.

"At 'em, old man Tony!" yelled Jack Rabbit, setting the good example. "Cut through them to the open—once there and we are safe enough!"

Unfortunately his words were understood by more than the dumb scout, and with roaring yells, the Pawnees gathered their greatest strength in that direction. Yet, undaunted the riders urged their snorting animals on, clearing a path for them with revolvers that seemed to emit a never-ending flame and shower of bullets.

The Pawnees clung to the bridles, to the legs of the riders, seeking to drag them from the saddle, loosing their hold only in death. Al—the savages, the madly plunging horses, tearing with their teeth, striking fiercely with their forefeet or lunging out viciously behind, the two pale-faces—all seemed mad, insane—struggling like wild beasts.

But then the pistols failed—such hot work could not last long. Armed only with knives, now, the scouts could scarcely hope to battle long with the tide, weakened though it was by the death of many a stout brave. And, to increase their peril, the struggles of their horses grew more feeble, and the dumb scout could feel the hot life-blood spirting over his leg.

As yet, not a blow had been aimed at the life of the pale-faces, though flesh wounds had been given. As Black Tiger dashed past, he bade his braves capture the scouts, not kill them. In this lay the reason for the fierce struggles to dismount the men, to drag them from the saddle, when mere might of numbers would quickly end the affair. And failing in that, they plied their knives and hatchets upon the dumb brutes.

When Jack realized this, he saw that there was only one hope for them now, and promptly seized upon it. He urged his laboring animal alongside the big buck-skin, and shouted in the scout's ear:

"Together, now—to the pocket!"

His words were understood and promptly obeyed. Turning abruptly, they plunged forward through the few braves who had been in their rear. Dashing through them, it seemed as though they would gain the covert with ease; but to the great joy of the yelling red-skins, the big buck-skin plunged heavily forward, dismounting its rider. Like a cat, Tony Chew alighted on his feet, rifle in hand, and met the triumphant crowd with a deep roar of defiance.

With an encouraging cry, Jack Rabbit wheeled and plunged into the thick of the fight, scattering the combatants in every direction.

"Run for it, old man—I'll cover you!" he shouted.

The dumb scout simply wound one hand in the horse's thick mane, twirling his heavy rifle with the other, as easily as a child winds its top whip; and thus they tore through the bleeding ranks.

Jack felt his noble horse quivering in every nerve, and knew that the end was nigh, but more than life depended upon him now, and he mercilessly plied his spurs, urging the blood-bay on with voice as well. One mighty effort, and then the noble brute fell to the ground, dead. But its work was nobly done. Its life-blood crimsoned the rocks at the mouth of the pocket.

Falling clear of the dying animal, Jack carried Mini Lusa into the defile, then left her to rejoin Chew, who was hurling back the yelling savages. Taking the risk, Jack paused long enough to change cylinders in one of his revolvers, and then opened fire upon the Pawnees. Sullenly they fell back, not to fly, but to shelter themselves behind the numerous bowlders which lined the base of the cliff, knowing that the scouts were in a trap, from which retreat was impossible.

The first care of the two scouts at this timely reprieve, was to carefully reload their fire-arms, and when this was completed without interruption, they breathed more freely.

"The fools have thrown away the lead, now," laughed Jack, shortly. "My hair is safer than I ever expected it to feel again. They had us up to the last notch, then!"

The dumb scout made no reply, but held up his hand, as though in warning. The gesture needed no explanation.

From afar off, borne upon the wings of the night air, came strangely significant sounds; sounds that told of devilish passions, of bloodshed and death.

"God help them!" muttered Jack Rabbit, huskily. "And we here, unable to lift a finger in their defense!"

"They are doomed—thank the Great Spirit that you are not with them!" came an earnest, low voice from the gloom close beside the young borderer.

"You are right, darling—I have much to be thankful for, since you are not taken from me."

Old man Tony sniffed disapprovingly. Possibly he was thinking that, only for this little darling of Jack's, they would at that moment be free in his almost native desert, safe upon the backs of their gallant steeds, instead of being penned up in a long, narrow pocket, guarded by inveterate foemen, their horses dead. Truly, the picture was not pleasant.

Close together, the trio listened to the sounds of the fight over the wagon-train, awaiting the result in painful suspense, though possibly all were not actuated by precisely the same feeling. Certain it is that at least one fervent prayer went up for the preservation of the Mad Chief, that night.

And then they heard the shrill, prolonged yell of complete triumph, and knew that all was over—that the buffalo-hunters had succumbed.

"That settles the question with us, then!" muttered Jack. "Our only chance is to hold out until the chief, Keoxa, comes. If we had food and water—"

Old man Tony gently touched Jack's arm, made a quick series of motions, which Rabbit interpreted quite as much by touch as sight, then, prostrating himself, the dumb scout glided silently away through the darkness, vanishing like a phantom of the air.

Chew did not underrate the danger of the task he had set himself, nor was he a man to throw away a single chance. Without even so much noise as a serpent makes in gliding leisurely through the stiff prairie grass, he crept out from the pocket toward the spot where Jack's horse had fallen dead. And though at least half a score of Pawnees were within as many yards, he succeeded in reaching the body undiscovered.

First securing the large leathern flask which had been freshly supplied with water for their intended desert ride, he cut off a large chunk from the animal's haunch. If not the choicest food, it would still ward off starvation. And then, with equal skill, he retraced his steps, regaining the pocket in safety, without the savages suspecting what was going on beneath their very noses.

"That makes our case look better," said Jack. "But see! The devils are making a clean sweep!"

The sky beyond was gradually lighting up with a lurid glare that told but too plain a story. Whatever little of hope they may have felt, was now dispelled.

Slowly and wearily enough the hours dragged by, even to Jack Rabbit; for Mini Lusa, with a feeling natural enough under the circumstances, had drawn aside, crouching down beside a bowlder, hiding her face in her hands. And Jack, though he had been inspired with a deep and pure, though so sudden, love for the child of the desert, could not yet forget that all this bloodshed and death had been caused by her father.

Though expecting it at every moment, no attack was made upon them that night. The day dawned clear and beautiful. Tony Chew, with a nonchalance born of his adventurous life, kindled a fire and set about cooking the supply of meat which he had so adroitly procured, when the loud voice of Black Tiger was heard without summoning them.

Tony nodded in answer to Jack's inquiring glance, and the young borderer answered the challenge.

"I wish to have a talk with you," added the chief. "Will you come out here, or shall I come inside?"

"Neither. I don't believe we would agree very well as close neighbors, after last night. We can hear what you have to say very well as it is."

"Take care! The score against you is heavy enough without any more insolence. But let that pass. You have my daughter a captive?"

"Yes," replied Jack, taking his cue from Chew's fingers.

"What do you mean to do? Of course you know that we can either take you by storm or starve you out. Then why be obstinate? Set my child free, safe and unharmed, and we will let you pass out and give you two hours' start before we take your trail."

"Thanks—but we prefer to take our chances here, after the way in which you testified your friendship for your dead friends and brothers last night. If you want us you must come and take us," cried Jack, scornfully.

This speech seemed to madden the chief, and his wild war-cry rung out shrilly, urging his braves to the assault. Dropping his toasting-stick, Tony joined Jack, and as one echo their rifles spoke, not in vain. Still the red-skins pressed on, leaping from rock to rock, sending a flight of whistling arrows before them, seemingly bent upon carrying the pocket by storm.

Jack Rabbit forced Mini Lusa to shelter herself in a little niche, then taking his position before her, while Tony stationed himself directly opposite, coolly took advantage of every chance given by the savages. The inestimable value of their Colt's "Navys" now became evident. With the range, force, and accuracy of any muzzle-loading rifle, their six chambers piece were equal to as many separate weapons. Nor did the scouts waste their chances; whenever a savage broke cover there was a bullet sent with unerring accuracy, carrying death or wounds upon its wings.

Thus the rush was quickly checked; though the savages still kept up their yelling and making numerous feints as though to draw the fire of their enemy.

"They mean mischief of some kind—but what is it?" at length muttered Jack, with an uneasy glance around. "There is no other way of getting in here, is there, little one?" he nodded, turning to Mini Lusa.

"No—only that one."

He was not kept long in suspense. A hoarse cry came from the big scout's lips, and he pointed upward. A large boulder was seen to strike against a rocky point, then descend, bounding from side to side of the deep pocket, falling not twenty feet from the young borderer's covert.

Shrill yells broke out from above, answered by those of the Pawnees who remained on guard before the entrance. And then, from as many different points, a full score of boulders and ragged pieces of rock were hurled over the sides of the defile, thundering down, threatening death to all below.

CHAPTER XXV.

BENEATH THE MOUNTAINS.

THE shock of the falling mass of rock was terrible, and for a time the trio, Rosina, Sandoval and Pablo, were fairly stunned, lying as they had been cast in a heap together. But it was not long before they comprehended the full peril of their situation.

Buried alive in that little den, with no water and only a few ounces of dried meat for food. The prospect was not reassuring.

All was still as death. Not a sound came from without. The air inside was close and stifling, thick-laden with a musty, disagreeable dust. The young men cautiously groped around the entrance; but their faint hopes were quickly crushed. A rat could not have found exit at that point, much less a man.

It was then that their great fear came upon them, and drawing together they cowered there in silence, afraid to speak lest they should find that each harbored the same dread thought—that they were doomed never to see the light of day again—doomed to drag out the little remnant of their miserable lives in this dark, dismal den, to perish, finally, by starvation.

Don Leon was the first to recover his natural presence of mind. He bade his companions still hope—that Providence would yet befriend them. It may be doubted whether he believed this himself, but he at least spoke as though he did, nor were his words without effect.

"If we only had a light," muttered Pablo.

"We will have one. Take things cool, and do as I tell you."

Sandoval plied his flint and steel, while Pablo made a good-sized "spit-ball" of powder, then rolling it in dry powder, wound all up in a sleeve of his spencer. By means of the tinder, this novel torch was at length ignited, and by its light the whole interior of the little cave was distinctly visible. There was little to see, at first glance.

Pablo had guessed pretty accurately as to its size, save that the roof was considerably higher than he had thought.

Suddenly Rosina grasped Leon's arm, convulsively, pointing upward with trembling hand. A gasping cry broke from the young man's lips and his hand quivered so as to nearly drop the blazing torch.

And yet—'twas a simple thing to occasion so much excitement. A darker portion of the wall—a black spot. Ah—but they knew that this black spot was a *hole*—a means of leaving the den which, until then, they had feared was destined to become their tomb.

In another moment Pablo was up the wall, his body half thrust into the hole. All was darkness the most intense. What if the hole ended—the thought sickened him. But with a violent effort at self-control, the young buffalo-hunter raised his voice and shouted aloud.

The result was marvelous. The voice seemed multiplied hundreds of times, reverberating in every direction, now dying away in a long, smooth roll, now as suddenly returning, as though somebody had replied to his signal, playing a thousand tricks and antics.

"Thank God!" fervently exclaimed Sandoval, clasping Rosina tightly to his side. "There is a chance for us yet; the mountain is hollow!"

Thanks to his faithful lasso, Don Leon quickly drew Rosina after him, and then with emotions hardly to be described, they gazed wonderingly around them.

They evidently stood upon the verge of an immense subterranean chamber. Above their heads the roof was low, nearly within arm's-length, but then it sloped regularly away until lost to their sight. In the light of the falling torch the scene was one of dazzling brilliancy; ten thousand points flashed back the red gleam.

Pablo and Rosina stood enthralled, but Sandoval, as the torch burned closer to his hand, was less enthusiastic, until his anxiously-roving gaze fell upon a little pile of dust-colored objects, which he quickly turned over with his foot. Then his cries are quite as joyful, for he had found ample means for keeping a light, in the bundle of powder-dry fagots.

"Thanks to our lady!" he muttered, reverently. "Come, Pablo; make up a bundle of these knots. Our lives depend upon keeping a light."

Each one bearing a lighted torch, the trio, with some misgivings, it must be confessed, slowly started to explore the chamber, pausing now and then to view some unusually brilliant point. Though, as a rule, the walls and ceiling of the long chamber were arched, its general shape not unlike that of a white-tilted "prairie-schooner," in places the outline was broken and irregular, and here the red light of the torches was cast back with unusual brilliancy, the projecting points and spurs of quartz seemingly loaded with precious gems and crystals.

In awe-stricken silence the trio slowly followed the gently winding course of this marvelous gallery. The weird grandeur was oppressive. They seemed to be wandering through some fabled region, now for the first time revealed to mortal gaze.

"Leon," abruptly uttered Pablo, his eyes dilating wildly, "look at this—and here again!" placing a finger upon several deep, discolored spots in the rock wall beside him. "Do you know where we are?"

"I had suspected—but this places it beyond doubt. We are not the first party whose eyes have been dazzled by this sight. This is one vast gold mine—one whose riches are incalculable."

"But the mine is still rich—see the gold! how the spurs glisten! Why, then, is it abandoned—where are the men who worked it, the men who made these marks and scars?" added the young buffalo-hunter, his hand resting upon the seamed and disfigured rock.

"Where?" returned to dust. You have heard of the great insurrection—of the time when the tame Indians uprose and flung off the yoke of slavery, when the San Saba Mission and silver mines were destroyed? Doubtless this mine suffered as well, in that dread year, 1758—"

Rosina gave a little shriek, and clung convulsively to Sandoval's arm. The cause of terror was visible.

From out the darkness at their left hand came a faint, misty glow—an irregular, flickering light rising from the ground; and a moment's scrutiny revealed a startling, ghastly sight.

Ranged in a row, lay near a dozen bare, fleshless skeletons. A weird, phosphorescent glow cast every bone into bold relief—caused the limbs to quiver and tremble as though just about to spring into motion—caused the grinning, fleshless jaws to expand into a horrible smile.

The sight would have been a gruesome one to wiser heads than those of our friends; they, ignorant of all beyond the bare details of every-day life, superstitious as all their race are, turned and fled from the spot with the speed of terror, pausing only when their further progress was barred by a rough wall of rock.

Trembling still, they glanced around them, drawing a long breath of relief when assured that the dreaded specters had not pursued them; and replacing the exhausted torch with another, the trio examined their present situation.

The chamber had narrowed to a long, high passage, ending abruptly, as stated. Sandoval's heart beat rapidly as he vainly searched for a continuation of the passage. Had they progressed thus far, only to have their growing hopes shattered—only to find their further progress barred—their tomb still a tomb, though a large one?

From the gloom at one side, Pablo uttered an exclamation. They found him bending over the fragments of what bore the appearance of having been a huge, cumbersome ladder.

"There must be a way of getting out, up yonder," the young hunter muttered, excitedly, as he dropped his bundle of fagots.

Rosina covered her eyes with a shudder as her brother, aided by the projecting points and spurs, slowly scaled the perpendicular walls. Fainter and less distinct grew his figure—then vanished from view altogether. For a few minutes their suspense was almost unbearable. With each moment they dreaded lest his body should come dashing down to death at their feet, precipitated from the unknown heights above by a slipping hand or foot, or the giving way of some treacherous point of rock.

"Holy Mother of Mercy—thanks!"

The exclamation came devoutly from their lips as a clear, exultant shout from Pablo relieved their fear—a cry that bethought success.

"Throw up the lasso—where you hear my voice. I've found another passage!" added the hunter.

After several trials, the rope was caught by Pablo, and securely fastened. Then, bidding Rosina fear nothing, Leon rapidly scaled the frail ladder, pausing beside Pablo.

Following his instructions, the maiden seated herself in the lowered noose, and was carefully drawn up the shaft. This accomplished, another torch was ignited, and the trio glanced curiously around them.

They were standing upon the verge of what appeared to be quite as large a chamber as the one first discovered. There was the same gleaming of quartz points, reflected in a thousand rays from the red glow of the blazing torch. And in the

exultation of revived hope the trio pressed forward, forgetting all about the precious bundle of fagots upon which their very lives depended.

The chamber was crossed. At its further end was a narrow, low tunnel, which, as the only means of leaving the cavern, they entered. Its course was winding and tortuous, at times almost impassable from the debris which had dropped from the roof and sides. It was nearly an hour before they emerged into a smaller chamber. The torch was burning low, and Leon turned to Pablo for a fresh fagot. For a moment they were dumbfounded, but the torch flashed upon them, and Leon volunteered to return for them.

"Be careful—do not stir from this spot," he cautioned them, as he turned and re-entered the tunnel.

The minutes passed drearily enough, in the dark, and seemed hours in length. Then Pablo rose erect, to stretch his limbs. It was an unlucky move for him. Scarce had he taken a dozen steps when the ground seemed to give way beneath his feet. A piercing scream—then a horrible stillness!

CHAPTER XXVI

A BLACK RECORD.

"I am Ruez Arroyal!"

Thus spoke the chief of the Pawnees, his frame dilating, his voice ringing out deep and sonorous, the fires of undying hatred and lust of vengeance filling his eyes, his long, bony fingers playing nervously with the handle of his scalping-knife.

Felipe Raymon sunk back with a low, gasping cry, his bronzed face turning ashen gray, his eyes filled with a look of absolute terror. His wildest fears were fully confirmed. He knew that his death-doom had been spoken, that the terrible death which, until now, he had believed forever canceled by death, was being presented for payment in full.

His wife, Juanita, was no less deeply affected. She lay back upon the rude pallet of skins like one suddenly bereft of life—only her bosom heaving convulsively as her eyes stared vacantly upon the Mad Chief.

He laughed—cold and chilling—as he noted the effect of his speech. He seemed already tasting his long-deferred vengeance, finding it sweet beyond measure. And after a moment's pause he continued, his voice sounding low and almost musical:

"I see you have not forgotten entirely; and yet—many years have passed since those days, so many that you might well be forgiven for not remembering. It was such a little matter, too—only the dooming to a living death of a poor, friendless devil—no more! You might well have forgotten—not so I. The past is plain enough to me. I take pleasure in recalling it—in living over every little incident and detail of those days. Why? Because I wished to keep the memory fresh until the day of settlement—*this day!*

"It is an amusing story, too. A high-born, beautiful lady—a handsome, wealthy lover—a poor, soft hearted devil of a hunter who still believed in human nature, in woman's truth and fidelity—poor devil!

"Come! the night is before us. You look dull and down-hearted. The story of this poor fool of a hunter will amuse you—perhaps 'twill make you laugh, even.

"He was young and passably good-looking, this fool of a cibolero—a gay, careless devil, fond of his wild, reckless life, contented with little, more than satisfied when, after his long journey into buffalo-land, he could chink one onza against another. He was skillful and adroit, too, this hunter; he could trail the bull, pluck the cock, handle the lasso, lance and bow with the best. Better for him, perhaps, had he been less skillful.

"It was at the feast of San Marcos. This devil of a hunter was very fortunate. He plucked the cock, bore it safe through the crowd, avoided them all and returned safely to the starting-point, the cock alive and uninjured. He paused before the row of spectators, and I have heard that more than one fair senorita spoke of his looking handsome as a god, this poor devil of a hunter, as he bestrode his gallant bay mustang, his head bared, his eyes almost timidly roving over the beautiful faces so intently watching him.

"He plucked a few feathers from the neck of the gallo, and bound them together with a ribbon taken from his shoulder-knob, riding slowly along the line. He paused, dismounted—knelt bashfully before a fair young lady; his stout hand trembled like a blade of prairie-grass as he gently placed the knot in her lap. Not until the chorus of cheers and *vivas* died away did he dare raise his eyes—this poor, silly hunter. Then *sangre de Cristo!* He saw the bright smile, the flushed cheek, and heard the gently-murmured thanks as the fair senorita fastened the *parache* above her fluttering heart.

"Poor devil! that was glory enough for one day, it would seem. But not so. Night came. At the dance they met again, and were partners. He grew bolder as he listened to her soft voice and flattering words. Until then he had only dared worship—as the earth-worm might adore the sun. How was he to know that she was playing with him—that her kind words were mere empty sounds? Poor devil! he gazed upon the sun until his eyes grew blind, until the burning rays ate down into his very heart. He listened to the music of her voice until it made him drunk. He forgot all—forgot that he was nothing but a miserable cibolero, whose sole fortune was

a horse, a bow and his empty hand. He forgot that she was of the *sangre azul*, that her family—the proudest in the land—could trace their descent far beyond Cortez and his *conquistadores*—forgot that they could buy ten thousand such as he and still be rich. He forgot all this; only saw the beautiful face, the kind smile, only heard the soft words that did not rebuke his presumption. Was he not a fool, this poor devil of a cibolero?

"He lived in paradise for over a month, this hunter. He saw the senorita frequently, nearly every day. They had a rendezvous sacred to their love-meetings—it was love, pure, honest and sincere, upon *his* part. *Madre de Dios!* how he loved—worshiped her! And she? Well, 'twas a pleasant enough amusement for her, for a time. He was not ill-looking, there was a rude eloquence in his words that interested her—and his thorough devotion flattered her love of power.

"But then she grew weary of the farce. And while his kisses were still warm upon her lips—even as his strong arms held her clasped to his breast, their hearts beating together their breath mingling as he urged her to flee with him—even then she formed the plot which was to free her forever from the poor devil and at the same time to afford herself and real lover material for a hearty laugh at the fool's expense.

"It was a cunning plan—one that a colder brain would have been deceived by. She consented to become his—to abandon all for his love, and vowed to follow his fortunes until death severed the tie. But not just then. She must have time. In two more nights—then they would meet to part no more this side of the grave.

"The hour came. Be sure the poor devil was not long behind the moment set. Nor did she keep him waiting. Mother of Mercy! the joy of that moment! when he clasped her in his arms and pressed her warm, ripe lips! Had he only died then, believing in her truth and honesty—but no—his eyes were to be opened wide enough ere that moon waned.

"They heard a footstep. She fled, with a little scream. He turned, only to be stricken down by a treacherous blow from behind. But this devil of a hunter was not one to tamely give up. He arose—he saw that near a dozen armed men surrounded him. Even then he did not realize the truth. He believed that the father of his loved one had surprised their secret and was seeking vengeance for the supposed dishonor of his daughter.

"He did not belie his training, this hunter of buffalo. He used his weapons as only a man could. Blood sprinkled the ground freely—not all his own. Three men lay gasping out their last breath of life when he was finally overpowered.

"They dragged him far away, pausing beneath a dead tree. Then the leader spoke. He told the bleeding wretch how he had been deceived—how the fine lady had led him on, storing up his fine speeches to repeat them to her favored lover—of the rare sport they had had in laughing over his folly; and how she had plotted his capture and punishment.

"The punishment! It was a mere trifle—too slight for the enormous sin of which the cibolero had been guilty. His ears were cut off and pinned to the tree. A lasso was noosed around his neck and he was drawn up to the limb, and left to slowly strangle. That was all."

The Mad Chief paused and slowly filled his pipe, his burning eyes fixed upon the pale features of his terror-stricken captives. Then he slowly resumed, his voice sounding cold and more metallic:

"That was the end of this poor devil of a hunter. He died—the better part of him. Yet, when the man who murdered him sought the body, it was gone. How, no one ever found out. I cannot say. Perhaps the rope broke. Perhaps a passer-by took pity on the cold clay and cut the cord. The next two years are a blank. Then—the body of the hunter returned to life, but with a new heart. He could remember everything up to the moment when the cruel lasso cut short his breath. And remembering, he swore an oath—what that oath was, you can guess.

"He found himself living among the Indians, who looked upon him as great medicine. They watched him close, but finally he stole away and returned to the spot where he died. Here he found those for whom he sought. They were married—they had a child—they were happy, rich, contented.

"From that day his revenge began. The debt was too vast to be wiped out with one stroke. He preferred payment by installments. A strange disease attacked the husband's stock. His cattle died by scores—hundreds. They were poisoned. Then, in the middle of the night, his cattle-sheds, corrals and grain stacks caught fire and were burnt; only one man knew how.

"After this, he was suffered to live in peace for nearly a month. Then his slaves and herdsmen took ill and died, one after another. A curse seemed upon the house. Only one man could have solved the mystery. He alone knew the secret of the poisoned spring.

"Another month—then the first-born—the darling of their heart—disappeared, nor could he be found, despite the long and close search. During this search, the main dwelling and the rest of the building were destroyed by fire. The happy husband and father returned to find only a blackened hearthstone.

"They found a resting-place with her father. A week later, when they awoke in the morning, they found, lying beside their bed, the mangled, disfigured remains of their lost child. How it came there, only one man knew.

"And so, month after month, the poor devil of a hunter sipped his revenge. Bit by bit, the new home was made desolate; the riches of the father melted away, even as the

son's had before him. The people began to shun them all; whisperings of the curse of God were heard on every side. And so, little by little, they descended the scale. From being the most wealthy, the family became the poorest, shunned as though they were lepers. Ah! it was sweet revenge!

"But even a devil cannot endure everything, and the brain of the avenger gave way once more. For years his mind was a blank. When he recovered, all trace of his victims was lost. He could only learn that they had left those parts, miserably poor, afoot.

"For years he searched, but in vain. Then, when he had begun to despair of ever again finding the trail, he met them face to face in the desert.

"What followed, *you*, Felipe Raymon, and *you*, Juanita, his wife, can tell. You remember the poor devil of a hunter?—ah! you shudder and cower back! Yes, I—the Mad Chief—I am all that remains of the gallant and once handsome Ruez Arroyal—the man who was mocked, mutilated, and almost murdered!" to satisfy your vanity and love of power.

"And now—the end is at hand! My cup of vengeance is full—it shall be drained to the very dregs! For long, weary years I have waited—waited, and watched for this moment—and now—"

"Mercy—have mercy!" gasped Raymon. "Not for me—I can die—but for her—for my wife and children—"

"Mercy? Yes! mercy such as you and she had upon me—none other! Mercy? Listen—*this* is the mercy you shall receive—"

A sharp cry resounded from just without the lodge door, and then the skin flap was hurriedly raised and a warrior entered. After a few hasty words he departed, followed by the Mad Chief, leaving the wretched captives alone with their torturing thoughts.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AID FROM THE ENEMY.

THUNDERING, crashing, leaping from point to point, now directly toward the besieged trio, now bounding away at an abrupt tangent, as it struck against some projecting spur—enveloped in a cloud of dust and debris, the heavy bowlders plunged down into the narrow pocket. High above the crash and rumble rose the shrill, exultant yells of the Pawnees; those upon the heights madly toiling to tear the huge bowlders from their resting-place, their comrades gathered around the mouth of the pocket with bended weapons, in readiness to receive the two pale-faces the moment they should be driven from their stronghold.

The peril was one that increased with every moment. The scouts exchanged looks of doubt and indecision. Had they been alone the plans of the Mad Chief would have been fully met; they would have sallied forth, if to death, at least having the satisfaction of falling in the act of striking the enemy, not wholly unavenged.

With scarce a moment's interval came the bowlders, and now, loosened by the frequent heavy shocks, great splinters of the side-walls began to give way, falling sullenly upon lower and stouter points, bursting into scores of fragments, scattering in every direction—a flinty hailstorm, that carried death upon its wings.

Anxiously enough the friends watched the rocky avalanche, in readiness to leap either forward or backward, as needs be. It was not long before they saw the reason of their having escaped so long. Though the bowlders were discharged from a point almost directly above them, a peculiar slope in the walls carried the rocks to the right, or between their position and the mouth of the defile. That the savages above also perceived this error in their calculations was evident from their change of position, and the first boulder thundered down, falling upon the exact spot where, a moment earlier, Mini Lusa had crouched. But the watchful eye and ready arm of Jack Rabbit saved her from death.

Raising her in his arms like an infant, the young borderer darted aside, so narrowly escaping the falling mass that the accompanying dust and debris powdered him from head to foot.

The peculiar, roaring cry of the dumb scout followed the deafening crash, and then Jack Rabbit felt the maiden lifted from his arms, and saw Tony Chew bearing her up the side of the pocket, as though bent on scaling the perpendicular wall.

Quickly following, Jack soon realized the importance of Chew's discovery. Over a dozen feet above the bottom of the pocket the trio now nestled together in a small crevice or hole in the solid rock. It was as though some giant had buried his enormous ax to its very eye in the rock, then removed the weapon without splintering the stone above or below. In this refuge the hunted trio could surely bid defiance to their enemies. At least while the rocky avalanche continued no Indians could enter the pocket.

"We're worth a dozen dead men yet, old man Tony," said Jack Rabbit, with a long breath of relief. "Though it *did* look fishy for a spell. Ay! yelp on, you imps of the devil's kitchen! We can laugh at your hailstones in here."

Yet still the heavy bowlders thundered down the sides of the pocket, crashing upon those already accumulated, filling the air with dust and flinty particles. The borderers smiled derisively at this labor in vain of their enemies.

Jack Rabbit turned his attention to Mini Lusa, seeking to

distract her gloomy forebodings, to brighten and cheer her up. In this effort he was only partially successful, despite the ardent sentences which his soft voice poured into her not unwilling ear. It was a novel position for love-making—amid the crashing of descending bowlders, the occasional yell from some savage throat, while the giant borderer stood just before them, a stern, half-disgusted look upon his rugged features—but Jack Rabbit was not one to throw away even such a chance, when the hot burning words sprung so freely to his lips. And if Mini Lusa was not convinced of the depth and power of his suddenly-born love, she must have been something more or less than human.

There is an end to all things earthly; so there was to this very agreeable occupation of the young scout. Tony Chew touched him upon the shoulder, then worked his fingers rapidly. His meaning was rendered even more clear as a large, heavy mass of rock crashed down and remained stationary directly before the entrance of their retreat, blocking it half up.

"So—that's their game!" and Jack's brow darkened. "They think to build us in—to bury us beneath their accursed stones. Well, there's only one way for us, unless we can keep the passage clear; to make a break for it, and go under with a grand hurrah, boys!"

Tony Chew made no reply, but contented himself with rolling back a smaller boulder which had lodged upon the mass of rock. At all hazards the passage must be kept clear.

Yelling exultantly, working with redoubled vigor now that they saw how nearly complete was their task, the Pawnees hurled rock after rock over the walls, encouraged by the loud voice of the Mad Chief.

The two scouts worked desperately, more than once narrowly escaping a terrible death by the descending rocks, rolling back the heavy masses which threatened to wall them in beyond the possibility of escape. Yet, as the rock barricade rose higher and higher around them, the hopes of the brother scouts grew fainter. Soon it would grow impossible to remove the bowlders—to do anything but remain quiet and await the end. The day was little more than half spent, and though the rocky masses descended less frequently, there was time enough for the Pawnees to securely wall them in long ere the sun should set.

Sternly despairing, the two men ceased their almost superhuman exertions and betook themselves to their rifles, true to the instincts of their craft wishing to exact the heaviest possible price for their lives. But in this they were fated to be disappointed. Either the savages believed their work completed, had exhausted the supply of loose rocks, or else had been called off from their task by the Mad Chief. Chew did get a single shot—a momentary glimpse of a copper-colored limb, and sent a bullet to feel its texture; but whether successful or not, no sound came to bear evidence.

The hours of the afternoon crept by slowly and heavily enough, broken only by an indistinct, murmuring sound evidently coming from the inclosed valley beyond. Jack, utterly exhausted from loss of sleep and his late unusual labors, now lay at Mini Lusa's feet, sleeping soundly. The giant borderer, like one made of iron instead of flesh and blood, wakeful and vigilant as ever, kept a close watch upon every side, lest the enemy should attempt to steal upon them unawares.

And while thus occupied, a bright glow gradually crept over his bronzed features, his eyes sparkling with pleasure. And indeed he had made a discovery upon which their lives and freedom might depend.

What had bade fair to prove their destruction might accomplish their freedom. Bit by bit he traced it out, and then, fully assured, he aroused Jack Rabbit.

"Look!" his fingers nimbly spelled. "The devils, in casting down these rocks, thought to crush us or bury us alive—instead, they have only laid a trail over which we can pass to liberty!"

The keen-eyed adventurer realized the truth of his friend's remarks. Partly by piling up against the face of the walls, partly by splintering off portions of the rock itself, the bowlders now formed a steep, difficult yet practicable trail by which the pocket might be left.

"Good enough, old man Tony!" joyously cried Jack Rabbit. "We'll live to fool these traveling plague-spots a while longer. 'It'll be tough climbing—but we can do it. Only—it's more than likely that they have set guards along the ridge."

"That's a risk we must encounter," said the dumb scout's fingers. "Coming from below, we will be apt to see them first, and then—" A significant motion ended the sentence, perfectly understood by Jack.

It was then growing dusk, and they had not to exercise their patience in waiting very long. And then, cautiously, first keenly scrutinizing every foot of the rocks, they began their toilsome and perilous journey. Tony Chew led the way, following the trail he had already mapped out in his memory. Jack followed, dividing his attention between Mini Lusa and watching for any sign of the sentinels who might and probably were stationed above the pocket.

Foot by foot, yard by yard, they crept on, their progress rendered painfully slow not only by the natural difficulties to be surmounted, but by the knowledge that a single false step, the displacing of a stone, or the clink of a rifle barrel against the flinty rock might betray them to some watchful savage, who, if he did not pick them off in succession from his perch, would assuredly utter the signal that would bring an overpowering force upon them, when death or captivity—its equivalent—alone could follow.

Then the giant borderer abruptly paused. His keen eye had detected the shadowy outline of a crouching form against the sky beyond, silent and motionless, evidently unsuspecting how near were the fugitives whom he had been placed to guard.

The dumb scout drew his knife and crept forward. Jack and Mini Lusa crouched down, awaiting the result in painful suspense. The minutes rolled on. Would the end *never* come?

Then Jack drew a long breath of relief as he saw the shadowy figure of the savage abruptly sink back, and heard the faint sound of the death-struggle. So great was his faith in the prowess of his friend that he immediately pressed on, aiding the maiden with tender care. Nor was his confidence misplaced, for the dumb scout awaited them, his face as calm and unmoved as though he had not just cut short the thread of one human life.

The summit of the ridge was near, and Chew gained it without meeting further hindrance. But then a sudden change came over him. For a moment he seemed petrified, but then wheeled and barred the further progress of the young couple. Jack uttered a little cry of wonder as he felt the brawny hands upon his shoulders trembling as though stricken with an ague. But before he could speak, he heard a gasping cry break from the maiden's lips. She had slipped by the scout, and was now kneeling upon the summit, her hands clasped, a look of horror upon her averted face.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BOUND TO THE STAKE.

JACK RABBIT sprang quickly to the side of Mini Lusa. One rapid glance told him all, and then he stood as motionless as the maiden, only for a nervous clutching of his fingers. The giant borderer glided up beside them, his features once more composed and wearing their usual look of cold steadiness.

In truth it was a thrilling, blood-curdling sight that lay spread before them.

Almost at their feet lay the level, circular, basin-like inclosure, now brilliantly illuminated, not alone by the clear rays of the rising moon. Every detail, each figure, each point of rock stood out clear and distinct in the red glare of the fires. Around these fires were gathered the plumed and paint-be-daubed savages, now standing still and statuesque, listening to the words of their chief, who had once more assumed his role of Black Tiger, hiding his white blood beneath the funereal mask of black paint. His words were not audible to the trio upon the hill-top, but their import could be gathered from his gestures.

There were half a dozen captives bound to as many stakes firmly planted in the ground. Among them were young and lovely women—now brutally exposed, their white flesh shining clearly beneath the firelight. Their heads bowed, their locks disheveled—their very attitude betrayed what devilish tortures they had already undergone, so great that death would almost seem a precious relief.

There were two other captives, bound back to back in such a manner as allowed them to stand upright, though any attempt at escape would be impossible. These two, man and woman, were dressed. Even across the intervening distance the two scouts recognized Don Felipe Raymon and his wife.

"The accursed dogs!" breathed the young plainsman, fiercely. "To serve poor helpless women like that! Oh! for a dozen good men to scatter the cowardly curs—or even for my poor horse—they shouldn't have it all their own way."

Mini Lusa covered her face with her hands and cowered close to the ground with a bitter groan of anguish. She had recognized her father and could not mistake the leading part he was playing in this revolting tragedy. It was the first time that she had seen him at his worst—until now he had carefully kept the worst from her.

It was a painful ordeal for the comrades—to be forced to stand idle witnesses of the revolting crime; to see the helpless captives insulted and abused, to know that with every moment a horrible death was drawing nearer—yet unable to lift a finger in their defense. It would have been utter madness for them to have attempted interference, and though brave and daring to a fault, they crouched down beside the gray rocks in silence.

For half an hour longer the devilish preliminaries lasted, then, with a loud, ringing whoop, the Mad Chief gave the signal for the ready torches to be applied.

Was it an echo? that shrill, prolonged, quivering cry? No—the cadence is different, and see—the Pawnee brave would not express such wondering surprise and consternation at a mere echo.

Again the wild, thrilling sound—now accompanied by the rapid trampling of horses' hoofs upon the chalky shale.

"Comanche war-cry, by the eternal!" cried Jack Rabbit, springing to his feet. "It's Keoxa—glory be to Moses!"

Through the narrow entrance into the circular valley, riding down the trail skin lodges now all unguarded, charging direct on the confused and startled swarm around the fires, came a number of wild horsemen, pealing forth their peculiar battle cry, brandishing their lances, sending before them a cloud of arrows the dim, uncertain light magnifying their numbers—on

thundered the Comanches, led by a tall young chief whose voice rung loudest and most clear, the voice of Keoxa, the beloved son of Quanhthli, the Great Eagle of the Comanches.

Heading straight for the captives whose agonized voices now arose from the midst of the flame-tinged smoke, the young chief led his braves, plying their bows with an address that had already crimsoned the torn and trampled sward, then leveled their lances and tore bodily through the hastily rallied Pawnees, who flocked around their chief, whose loud voice commanded them at all risks to guard his two more precious captives.

This much the interested trio upon the hill-top saw, and then thoroughly fired by the exciting scene they broke through their forced caution.

"We must help them, old man," and Jack Rabbit breathed quick and hard. "The little one can stay hid here—"

Mini Lusa, just as the young scout spoke, sprang lightly down the rocky incline, sure-footed as the mountain-goat. After her darted Jack, but active as he was, the desert-bred maiden proved more than his match, keeping a score yards in advance, paying little heed to his anxious calling, seeing only her father's danger as he mingled in the thickest of the now desperate hand to hand fight.

Over the broken, uneven rocks, across the level space—then the light form of Mini Lusa disappeared amidst the *melee*. Jack plunged headlong after her—but then his hands were full with taking care of his body, as the nearest Pawnees recognized and turned fiercely upon him.

Side by side the comrades fought, and fortunate enough it proved for the young plainsman that one so cool and skillful was watching over his life, for he darted through and through the swaying mass, seeking for Mini Lusa, scarce heeding the many blows that were aimed at his life by both Pawnee and Comanche. But the dumb scout proved a famous body-guard. Of the many blows and thrusts not one fairly reached its intended victim, while rifle-barrel or pistol-shot promptly cleared their way.

This madness of Jack's lasted only for a minute; then his attention was distracted by the piercing shrieks of the unfortunate captives to whose bare limbs scorching flames had now reached, and whose tortures became unendurable.

Knife in hand he sprang to the rescue, nobly seconded by Tony Chew. The blazing jagots were hurled aside, the bonds were severed and the poor flame-scarred wretches were bidden save themselves as the scouts pressed on to complete their work of mercy.

In two instances at least they were too late—the savage tomahawk had been before them. And once again they were forced to look to their own lives as the thick of the fight rolled their way. Then it was that Tony Chew touched Jack by the shoulder and pointed to where the tall form of Black Tiger towered above his braves, his blood-dripping hatchet flashing in the red glare of the fires, his long white hair streaming loose, a devilish glitter in his eyes as he forced his two captives back toward the hill foot.

"On, then!" grated Jack, hoarsely. "Save them—but spare his life for her sake!"

Side by side they charged, their revolvers speaking rapidly for a few moments, until empty; then with clubbed rifles the comrades beat back the sullen foe. But when one brave fell another wolf-child took his place, keeping the line unbroken that surrounded the Mad Chief and his valued captives.

Then, shrill and piercing as the scream of the eagle, rung out the voice of Keoxa, and with one well-directed charge he broke the firm front of the Pawnees and hurled them to either side. Then the combat raged more and more fiercely, but the wolf-children were growing discouraged and were forced back more rapidly. Twice the Mad Chief uplifted his tomahawk to make sure of his revenge while yet it lay in his power, but as often lowered it when the chance of reaching the rocks grew momentarily brighter. Then it was too late. With a panther-like leap Tony Chew overthrew two stout braves and dashed Black Tiger aside with a stunning sweep of his rifle. Then he and Jack hurried the buffalo-hunter and his wife back to the rear, bewildered and stunned, yet alive and safe in limb.

Seeing the fall of their great chief and believing him slain, the Pawnees broke and fled in dismay, clambering over and up the rocks like frightened goats. After them sped the yelling, triumphant Comanches, until the clear voice of Keoxa sounded the recall. With admirable discipline the signal was obeyed.

Then and not until then did the young chief recognize the two scouts, and springing to the ground he bowed before them, pressing their blood-stained hands to his breast.

"Keoxa said he would come, and he is here." His heart is very glad that his brothers are both well.

"You are better than your word, chief," hastily replied Jack Rabbit, warmly clasping the Comanche's hand. "If you had not come before the day set, you would have found only our bones."

"Keoxa did not sleep along the trail," was the quiet reply. Then, with a motion of his hand, he called his braves around him.

A low murmur ran through their lines as the firelight shone full upon the strongly-marked features of the dumb scout. They recognized the being who had sent black gloom and bitter mourning into so many of their lodges—and more than one hand quickly clutched at knife or hatchet handle. But a quick gesture restrained their passions.

"Peace—these are my friends and brothers, and their enemies are my enemies. They saved my life when death

seemed certain, and not long after I had been trying to kill them. That made us friends. White Hair—he whom you know as Silent Tongue—has buried the hatchet forever with the Comanches."

And in a few pointed words the young chief told them the tragic story of the dumb scout; of all he had suffered, of his vow to punish the false friend who had tortured him and then sought refuge with the Comanches, ending with the death of White Crow, the renegade. The story was well received. Not one among them all but would have acted the same under similar circumstances. And from that day thenceforward, neither of the two borderers had cause to fear aught from the Comanche nation.

During all this talk Jack Rabbit had been burning with impatience, but knew that he must wait until the end. No sooner did it come, though, than he hastened to the spot where Black Tiger had fallen. His search was in vain. Either the Mad Chief had escaped of his own accord, or some of his braves had succeeded in removing the body.

From this he searched the entire field of battle for some sign of Mini Lusa, but again in vain. She was not among the dead or wounded. She answered not his voice as he called aloud her name. His heart felt heavy within him. To lose her now, after all that had passed!

From end to end he searched the valley, then passed into the half filled-up pocket, but only the echoes answered his call. Then, despairing, he started to climb the rocks toward the point upon the summit from whence they had first looked down upon the scene of torture, as a final resource. He fancied he saw a light figure flitting before him, and called aloud.

Faint and indistinct came the answer—he believed it the voice of Mini Lusa.

With a glad cry he sprang forward, clambering over the rocks in mad haste. He realized his folly, when too late. A gigantic figure uprose before him, with leveled rifle. A blinding flash—a sharp report; and the scout fell heavily backward.

And the voice of Black Tiger rung out in mad triumph.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WEARY WORK.

WITH a hoarse, inarticulate roar the dumb scout sprang forward, and in a marvelously short space of time gained the point where his young comrade lay doubled backward across a boulder, the blood trickling from his forehead, to all seeming dead.

The vindictive, exultant yell of Black Tiger was abruptly cut short as he stumbled heavily over a spur of rock, and had Chew been less completely absorbed in his examination of Jack Rabbit, the star of the Mad Chief would have, then and there, gone down in death. But his time was not yet, and limping hastily along he disappeared amid the shadows.

Raising the limp and nerveless form tenderly in his arms, Tony Chew bore the body down to the level, and beside one of the still smoldering fires. Here a close examination solved all doubts, and he knew that Jack Rabbit would live—that the Mad Chief's bullet, though grazing the young plainsman's temple and inflicting a painful flesh-wound, had only temporarily stunned him. And then, holding Jack's head in his lap, tenderly bathing his brow with cold water from the spring, the dumb scout listened to the explanation of Keoxa.

After his preservation from the Pawnee torture-stake by Jack Rabbit, the young chief made all possible haste toward the town of that portion of the Comanches under the especial command of his father, Quanhli, the Great Eagle. Yet his journey was quicker over than he could have hoped, since he came across the trail of a hunting-party, which his trained eye quickly read, and sending up a signal smoke, in two hours more found himself at the head of half a hundred true and tried warriors, who were only too glad to abandon the hunting-trail for the more exciting war-path. Dispatching two braves with a message to Great Eagle, Keoxa led the Comanches along the back trail, scarce halting long enough to give their animals a sup of water or mouthful of grass. Yet with all his haste he was not one moment too soon—was too late to save more than two of the captives besides Raymon and his wife. And as he spoke, the groans of the three fire-scarred wretches grew fainter and fainter, until, just as the gray light in the east heralded the coming of day, their last breath was drawn and their earthly pains were over.

Before this Jack had momentarily awakened to consciousness, but almost immediately sunk into a sound and refreshing slumber, which lasted for hours. With the exception of a few guards, all of the Comanches, including Keoxa and the dumb scout, lay down and slumbered until the red sun shone in the circular valley.

When Jack Rabbit awoke, he found the Comanches busily engaged in burying their dead. He and Tony drew aside and conversed earnestly. There could be but one subject, just then: that of Mini Lusa. Their words need not be recorded here, only that Jack earnestly swore he would never give over the search until he had found her.

Felipe Raymon and his wife soon joined them, sorely troubled over the fate of their children. Tony Chew appeared to take even more interest in this than in the other subject, and assured them—through Jack—that no stone should be left unturned, no efforts spared—that the lost ones should be found if mortal skill was equal to the task.

The clew was a faint one; only the report brought in by the Mad Chief's scout that the trail had been found. Since then the high winds had undoubtedly covered this with shifting sands. Only the direction in which it pointed remained to guide them.

Matters were explained to Keoxa, and he announced his readiness to undertake the task, though casting a thoughtful glance over the broken masses of rocks among which the surviving Pawnees had sought refuge. Beaten as they had been, they were still numerous enough to make serious trouble if they rallied under the guidance of Black Tiger, and there were scores of places among the hills where an ambush might be sprung with deadly effect.

Keoxa selected two choice animals from his herd, and presented them to the brother scouts, yet this generosity did not prevent them casting more than one regretful glance toward all that remained of their long-tried and matchless friends, the big "buck-skin" and the blood-bay. Only once in a lifetime were such superb mounts found, and for the time being the two adventurers felt much as a wild goose must with a newly crippled wing.

The remainder of the party, including Juanita Raymon, were furnished with mounts from the animals captured from the Pawnees, or else from those no longer needed by the Comanche braves, who had fallen during the brief but sanguinary fight. And then the party slowly filed out from the circular valley, and rode briskly around the rock point, heading for the spot mentioned in the Pawnee scout's report.

From time to time they caught glimpses of one or more skulking figures high up among the rocks, beyond rifle range, and though Comanche eyes glittered and fingers itched, all knew how worse than useless it would be to attempt a chase under the circumstances. The hills were too full of hiding-places for that.

"The dogs are curious to know where we are riding, chief," said Jack Rabbit, with a half laugh, pointing toward the ridge, where several nearly nude figures kept almost abreast them, despite the rough and difficult trail they were forced to follow.

"Like the coyotes that follow the hunter, they will keep beyond reach of a man's hand," tersely replied Keoxa, speaking, as Jack had, in Spanish. "They are dogs and children of dogs. When a man looks toward them they run and hide their heads in a hole. Hooh! the air stinks in my nostrils!"

"I like them no better than you, chief, yet I must say that they fight well for coyotes, when that Mad Chief or Black Tiger, whichever you please, leads them. I don't believe we are through with them yet. They have nearly as many braves now as we—and I know that he has more within easy reach. I shouldn't wonder if we found them waiting for us when we return to the valley."

"There is room at our belts for their scalps," quietly replied the young chief; and then the conversation dropped, the chief riding forward to give his scouts fresh instructions, and Jack, busied with his own thoughts, in which the daughter of Black Tiger figured prominently.

It would be weary work to follow them step by step along their blind trail, Jack inwardly chafing at what he could not help thinking was a waste of time, that might be more profitably employed elsewhere. They had nothing but the meager report of the Pawnee runner to depend upon, and he had only spoken of a trail found in the desert, and which had, almost beyond doubt, been since obliterated by the morning and evening breeze.

But at length even his dead interest was awakened. At the mouth of a narrow valley, plain and unmistakable sign was found. Half a dozen empty carts were drawn into a niche. Upon the level plot were signs of an encampment, torn and trampled, marked here and there by blood-stains. And then Senora Raymon uttered a sharp cry. At her feet lay a tiny gold cross attached to a broken hair-chain.

"My child—Rosina!" she cried, and would have fallen from her horse but for the ready arm of Jack Rabbit.

With this faint clew—for the cross had been worn by Rosina Raymon—the ground was closely searched by eyes that could almost trail the honey-laden bee through the air. Keoxa it was that first uttered the cry that told of a discovery, and he pointed out to the agitated father a small, slender footprint in the moist sand near the foot of a black rock. This, added to Senora Raymon's discovery, convinced them that the right trail had been found, and slowly they proceeded along the valley, lifting the trail with a skill that baffles description. Even Tony Chew, adept though he was, that day found that he had something yet to learn of his favorite art.

"Yet the trail could only be made out for a short distance. Where Rosina had left the valley and taken to the rocky hillside, all trace was lost. In vain the Comanches scattered and searched every foot of the ground. Their labor was in vain.

Every nerve tingled as a short, sharp whoop came from around a sudden curve, and, thinking that the lost trail had been found, all hastened thither. A ghastly sight met their gaze. A number of gleaming skeletons lay upon the blood-stained rocks, the bones still bearing marks of the keen teeth which had picked them clean.

From the scattered fragments of clothing, from a number of arrows and plumes, the trail-hunters had no difficulty in pronouncing the remains those of Pawnees. But who had slain them. That was fated to remain an enigma, for, despite a close search, nothing further could be learned.

The day was rapidly declining, and even Keoxa began to look keenly around him. For some time the number of

skulking figures among the rocks had been increasing, until now they numbered almost as many as the Comanches. From the summit of the ridge, too, the tall black columns of smoke rose nearly to the clouds. The Pawnees were signaling for reinforcements.

Though brave as the bravest, Keoxa knew the value of prudence, and gave the word to return to the circular valley, where they could successfully defy double their force. It was with a heavy heart that Raymon, supporting his half-conscious wife, followed them. It seemed like turning his back forever upon all hope of ever finding his lost children.

As before, the figures among the rocks bore them company, seemingly growing bolder, for more than one bullet and arrow was discharged from long range at them, but the valley was reached without any actual collision between the rivals.

There a horrible sight awaited them, and even the stoical Keoxa uttered a yell of angry vengeance as he realized the dastardly work that had been wrought during his absence.

The graves had been rifled, the dead braves scalped and mutilated beyond recognition, after which the remains had been placed in ridiculous attitudes, propped up with sticks and stones.

For a time the Comanches stood as if dumbfounded; then, as the triumphant yells came from the rocky heights where the Pawnees were observing their discomfiture, one and all madly rushed forward, panting for vengeance. Nor was it until Keoxa had repeatedly commanded it that they returned. He knew that an attack now, while the enemy were so advantageously placed, could only end in destruction.

"Come, old man Tony," muttered Jack, with a grimace, "this sight has parched my throat. I must have a drink. Let's go to the spring."

Together they rode toward the spring, where the waters gushed freely out from beneath the nearly perpendicular rock walls. But just as Jack freed his foot from the stirrup his face blanched and he uttered a little cry, outstretching his hand.

Tony Chew followed the direction with his eyes, and he, too, shrunk back, instinctively throwing forward the muzzle of his rifle.

From out the bare, unbroken rock, protruded a hand, white as snow, grasping a glittering knife.

CHAPTER XXX.

SUBTERRANEAN WONDERS.

SWIFTLY yet steadily Leon Sandoval glided along through the winding passage, his heart throbbing wildly lest the precious bit of wood that already he had been forced to stick upon the point of his knife to keep from burning his hand, should expire before he could regain the bundle of fagots so carelessly left behind. But fortune favored him still, and then, with a freshly lit torch he quickly retraced his steps.

When near the spot where he had parted from his companions, Leon shouted aloud to convey the good tidings. But no answering voice replied—only the dull, rumbling echoes of his own shout. Again he shouted, with the same result; then, with a strange foreboding of ill, he hastened forward, eager, yet dreading to learn the whole truth.

"Holy Mother of Mercy!"

The exclamation broke from his lips as he faltered and almost dropped the blazing torch. Before him lay the pale and seemingly lifeless figure of Rosina Raymon—but where was Pablo?

For a moment he glared around as though expecting an attack from some hideous foe—then, forgetting all else, sprang forward and raised the limp, nerveless figure of the maiden in his arms, pressing her cold lips, calling upon her in broken, incoherent accents, while the neglected torch flickered and expired at his feet.

Then, after Sandoval despaired of ever again hearing her voice, Rosina returned to consciousness with a gentle sigh. For a time it seemed to her all a horrible dream since she awoke with *his* arms wound around her and his kisses warm upon her lips—but then the dread truth flashed across her mind and amid her sobs she told Sandoval what had occurred.

The young cibolero had been given time to collect himself, and though greatly shocked by the news, it found him cool and collected. By aid of his powder-flask and flint and steel, he quickly relighted the torch, and moving cautiously forward, they soon stood upon the brink of a dark and seemingly fathomless abyss. They saw where the treacherous rock had crumbled and given way beneath the young man's feet, hurling him down to—what? Even the strong-nerved Sandoval shuddered as he realized what Pablo's doom probably was.

The opposite side of the chasm was just visible by the faint gleam of the flickering torch. The width was nearly twenty feet across. The sides seemed nearly perpendicular, if any thing widening as they descended.

Pausing beside the abyss Sandoval held a small fragment of rock over the pit and then dropped it, listening breathlessly. After what seemed a terribly long spell he heard a faint, sullen splash, as though the stone had fallen into water. Rosina heard the sound as well, and clung closer to Leon, a little sob of agony parting her lips.

"Mother of God, have mercy upon him! he is lost—lost!"

"It may not be—there may yet be hope," incoherently muttered Leon, yet feeling how vain were any words of hope.

Gently removing the maiden's arms and placing the torch in her hands, Sandoval unwound the lasso from around his waist and securely knotted one end to a projecting point of rock, testing its firmness with all his strength. Then, after a few cheering words to Rosina, while lighting a fresh torch and binding it to his left shoulder, he grasped the slender cord and cautiously swung himself over the verge of the black abyss.

With the thong wound several times around his right leg, the adventurer slowly descended, gradually turning round and round, peering keenly in every direction, listening anxiously; but no sound came to his waiting ears.

Down, still down, until he came to the end of the lariat. Save for the little circle of light cast out by the torch, everything was dark as he swung suspended in mid-air. He called aloud, pronouncing the name of his young friend, but only the hollow echoes answered. The strain was growing more and more severe upon his arms, and he dare not wait longer lest he should be incapable of returning. As it was, the feat was almost beyond his power. Only for the aid of Rosina he could never have crawled over the escarpment when reached, and for some minutes he lay panting, breathless, completely exhausted.

Now that Rosina knew the worst, she bore it with more fortitude than could have been expected, only mingling a fervent prayer for the repose of the lost one's soul with her efforts to restore Leon Sandoval. There could only be one solution to the continued silence of Pablo. He must have been killed outright by the fearful fall, or else lay below injured beyond the possibility of answering their calls. And of the two, the first seemed the most preferable; better a sudden and comparatively harmless death than to lie there beyond the reach of human aid.

When he recovered, Sandoval secured the lasso around his waist and took up the precious bundle of fagots, but he looked at Rosina in silence. She read it aright, and though the words cut her to the very soul, she bravely uttered:

"He is in the hands of his God. We can do nothing for him—nothing but pray. We have our own lives to care for—come, let us go."

Sandoval arose in silence. He knew how weak and worse than useless were words in the face of such a bereavement, but his unoccupied arm stole around the maiden's waist with a new tenderness which she felt and fully appreciated.

The chasm could not be crossed, and so, in hopes of finding a narrower part, or else where it ended altogether, the lovers slowly skirted the edge. They saw the end wall of the chamber grow plainer, while the chasm had not narrowed, and a sickening fear seized upon them—the dread lest this black pit should prove the end of their wanderings by barring their further progress. But then they made out a narrow shelf or pathway running close along the wall, and passing over with one sad, lingering look into the cruel, black depths, they turned their backs forever upon the spot where their new-born hopes had received such a blow.

A few moments more brought them to where two tunnels left the chamber, and after some deliberation, choosing the larger, they pressed on, beginning to feel the combined effects of fatigue, thirst and hunger. Gloomy enough were their prospects. More than once they were tempted to sink down and await death, clasped in each other's arms, rather than continue this long, killing struggle, the end of which seemed no nearer than at first. But life is very sweet, despite all, and still they kept on, weary and footsore, their throats dry and parched, their hearts heavy as lead.

The tunnel widened and opened into still another chamber; this time of vastly different shape and appearance. Long and narrow, with high ceiling, the roof, floor and walls of which were true and regular as though planned by a skilled architect.

A low cry of surprise broke from the wanderers. As the light of the torch fell athwart the wall it seemed as though they were in some weird, fantastic picture-gallery, where artists and sculptors of a forgotten age had recorded their grotesque fancies and imaginings.

Here, graven deeply by some keen-edged tool, was a small grove of trees; trees with human bodies and arms, with round, staring faces, with eyes made of coiled serpents, with teeth made of scorpions, surmounted and surrounded by thousands of long, slender serpents, twined and twisted together with a degree of skill almost marvelous. Above all circled a flock of birds. At the base of the trees knelt several naked human beings, bearing offerings of game, fruit, and, in one instance, a tiny babe.

Further along were painted figures of birds, animals and reptiles, some of them familiar and easily recognized, others of strange shape and characteristics—with two, three or a dozen heads; others with no head, only a cavernous mouth in the middle of the body, into which a score paws were conveying each a distorted, mangled human carcass.

These, and numbers of other equally grotesque fancies attracted the gaze of Rosina and Leon, until, their superstition fully awakened, they fled from the pictured horrors, half-expecting the grotesquely terrible monsters to spring into life and follow them.

Then, the gallery cleared, the wanderers gradually recovered from their sudden affright. They were in another larger, wider tunnel, where the sides and roof glittered and sparkled beneath the torchlight, giving evidence of the precious metal in abundance. But the fugitives gave little thought to this; all the gold in the world would have been rejected for a single cup of cold water and a mouthful of meat.

Just as they came to the edge of a small chamber, the torch in Leon's hand suddenly gave a flicker and died out. He regarded this with impatience, since it must lose them much valuable time in igniting another, but ere long he realized how fortunate it was, and recognized the finger of Providence in what he had deemed a misfortune.

Rosina, with a sudden start, interrupted his preparations, and pointed forward, forgetting that the darkness hid her action. But Sandoval saw what had caused her excitement. Far before them, faint and indistinct, he could make out a faint glow. It was too lurid for daylight—he knew that it was the reflection of a fire. But who had built it? friends or foemen? Were others than they buried in the heart of the mountain range? Or—and his heart throbbed rapidly between hope and fear—was it a fire kindled at the end of the passage, outside the hill? Had they found a place of exit, only to find it blocked up by cruel and bloodthirsty enemies?

All these reflections passed through his mind with the rapidity of light, then turning to Rosina, he said:

"You stay here—do not stir, darling, while I am gone. I must go and find out what that light means."

"We will go together, then, Leon. You—you are all that is left me now, and I cannot lose—"

"It is only for a moment, pet. There is nothing can hurt me, and I will return soon. That fire may be kindled by enemies, and you cannot creep silently enough for that. Their keen ears would hear you, and then we would both be killed."

Pressing her to his breast for a moment, Sandoval turned and silently glided toward the light, cautiously feeling his way lest the horrible fate of poor Pablo might also prove his. At length he paused beside a point of rock and peered out upon the scene.

It was a long, low chamber, with rough, irregular walls. Near one end glowed the embers of a fire. Upon a rock floor, surrounding the fire, lay stretched near a score of savages, Pawnees, as he readily decided by their paint; all appeared buried in slumber. But then something caught his eyes and caused them to sparkle. Hanging to the points of rocks were several leathern water-bottles and chunks of dried meat. Nearly famished though he was, he hesitated, but then the thought of Rosina determined him.

Scarce venturing to breathe, he crawled forward and tremblingly grasped a flask and piece of meat, then turned, and sprung toward the friendly darkness, just as a rifle exploded, followed by chorus of wild, excited yells, as the Indians bounded to their feet.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT DEATH'S DOOR.

As the rock crumbled beneath his feet and he felt himself falling down—down through what seemed an immeasurable depth, a single wild, piercing shriek of horror was wrung from Pablo Raymon's lips. Only one—then he felt a severe shock and a sensation of extreme cold, as though he had been plunged into liquid ice, and his senses fled.

Whether this period of insensibility was long or short, he never knew. The first sensation of returning life was a sharp sensation of pain as his body was swept against a hard substance, and with the instinct of a drowning man he flung up his arms and clutched at the point of rock.

He knew that he had fallen from above, fallen down how far he did not know, to be plunged into a body of water cold as ice and with a rapid current. A subterranean river? Possibly. He sunk down until only his head was above water, but his feet could not touch bottom. He sought to raise himself entirely out of the water, but in vain. With the exception of the one projecting bit of rock, the wall beside him was smooth and perpendicular. A cat could not have scaled it. And all these struggles but served to hasten the moment when he must release his hold upon the friendly bit of rock and go whither the rushing waters willed.

The thought was horrible enough, and the impenetrable darkness only added to its horrors. Death would be easier to face with open eyes—so he thought. Slowly, one by one, his fingers relaxed—the water tugged more fiercely, upon his body; then, with a shriek of despair, he sunk beneath the surface.

Only for a moment. Then he arose and battled madly with the murmuring, sullen water. His struggles kept him afloat, nothing more. He felt himself whirled madly on—on through the blackness, dashed now and again against the cruel rock walls, until at length a more severe blow almost stunned him, and though he still floated upon the surface, 'twas more the strength of the current than any skill or effort upon his part. The roaring sound grew louder and more intense—the waters seemed to run more swiftly; and then Pablo felt himself being dashed down—down, with the icy cold waters crushing out his scanty remnant of breath—a sense of horrible suffocation—then all was blank.

Feebly his eyes opened. With difficulty he lifted his head. Every movement caused him intense pain. His limbs were bruised and stiff as those of one suffering from rheumatism.

Yet he lived—that thought was all the young man's dull brain could compass just then. Feebly wondering how it had all come to pass, he dragged his benumbed limbs out of the ice-cold water and curled himself up on the rock shelf.

All around him was darkness. All? no! He rubbed his eyes and stared blankly ahead of him. Was it fancy—a mere delusion—or did he really distinguish a faint gleam like that

of a pale star witnessed from the bottom of a deep well? He closed his eyes for a moment, then reopened them. The little star was there—still shining for him. He crouched there longing, yet fearing to advance and solve the doubt—afraid lest the movement should frighten away the star.

Then, with a low, grating cry, he stumbled forward, afraid to remove his eyes from the starlike point, splashing through the water which was here not more than ankle deep. The star was just before him—he could distinguish the clear light of day through a tiny, irregular aperture—when he ran against the cold, hard rock. The shock was more than he could bear. He sunk down in the cold water with a cry of despair.

His spirit soon revived. Drawing his knife he struck the walls repeatedly on every hand. It was rock—nothing but rock. He was walled in, despite the little star.

He chipped away tiny bits of rock until he could thrust his hand through—out into the blessed air and light of day.

A sharp cry came to his ears, sounding from close beside him. Dropping his knife as he withdrew his hand, he glanced around him—all was darkness. Then he peered through the little hole. He saw human forms, heard the voice of white men, raised in wonder. He saw this, then raised his voice in one thrilling appeal for help—then his voice failed him and he sunk back like one dead. He had fainted.

He knew not that Felipe Raymon came up and recognized the knife as one belonging to his son; knew not that the men without were attacking the weather-bleached rock with iron bars taken from the plundered train, were undermining the stone—knew nothing of how the breach was effected and he himself carried out and given over to his sobbing mother.

When consciousness returned, Pablo Raymon managed to tell his story; then swallowed the broth and food prepared by his mother and sunk into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

Felipe Raymon acted like one demented after learning in what peril Rosina had been left, and piteously begged assistance to go to her aid. It was refused; not because their sympathies were not fully aroused, but all save he knew that a storm was brewing which would require every effort to avert, even if it did not overwhelm them entirely.

As the sun descended behind the rocky range the hillsides seemed fairly alive with dusky, painted figures, and Keoxa knew that the Pawnees would not allow the hour of darkness to pass without a desperate effort to wipe out the disgrace so recently cast upon them—knew that the Mad Chief was mustering his braves for a night attack.

His preparations were simple enough. His horses, together with the animals captured from the Pawnees, were tied securely together, ranged close along the most inaccessible portion of the rock wall. Before them lay his braves. The enemy, to reach them, must expose themselves upon the open ground.

Though the moon had not risen, the stars gave light enough for the keen-eyed sons of the desert to discover any foemen before they could creep within point-blank range. And so they lay, quiet, sternly awaiting the struggle that was to still forever many a proud heart that beat now so stoutly and confidently.

Senora Raymon and Pablo, whose sleep more nearly resembled death, were placed in a little niche beyond the line of horses where harm could not reach them while their defender lived. And through all the horrible uproar and confusion that ensued, the young buffalo-hunter slept as soundly and quietly as though safe at home and swinging in his hammock.

"They're coming, old man Tony," muttered Jack Rabbit, as he looked to his revolvers. "I caught the clink of a musket-barrel against the rocks over yonder. Keep an eye on the old man—that Mad Chief will try hard for him to-night."

Aided by the twinkling starlight, they could see the phantom-like figures of the Pawnees, as they crept slowly across the open space, then pausing just beyond the line where arrows might reach them with any certainty in the gloom.

A brief, awful pause—then came the wild ringing war-cry of Black Tiger, filling the hills with ten thousand echoes. And then, their hatred bursting forth in one prolonged, savage yell, the wolf-children boldly charged.

A cloud of arrows swept through the dark line, and mad exultation seized upon the snake children as they saw the braves drop here and there, their charge forever stopped by death.

Then came the short, sharp cry of Keoxa, as he arose and led his yelling braves to the fight; the shrill, piercing scream of Jack Rabbit, and above all the roar emitted by the tongueless giant as he leaped into the thickest of the *melee*.

Even in that thrilling moment, the complete influence of the young chief over his braves was manifest. Coolly the three braves whom he had singled out for the purpose, blew the carefully nursed embers into a blaze and applied them to the prepared piles of grass, buffalo-chips and fagots; then grasping their weapons they plunged into the thick of the fight, eager to make up for lost time.

The flames, roaring and dancing higher and higher, fanned by the fresh night-breeze, now fully lighted up the thrilling scene, showing each man where to strike, preventing friend from attacking comrade.

The details—what pen could give them?

Conspicuous, both from his stature and his mighty prowess, the Mad Chief raged here and there, ever seeking one face, one figure—that of Felipe Raymon, but who had been stricken down early in the fight. His arm is dripping blood to the very shoulder. He seems a battle-fiend.

Jack Rabbit, having emptied his pistols, took to his knife, and hatchet. His mad ardor soon separated him from his friends, but though surrounded by enemies, his wonderful

activity and skill had as yet saved his body from more than mere skin-deep wounds. The eye of Black Tiger makes him out, and the white-haired giant bounds toward him, hurling aside his own braves and dealing the young scout a blow from behind, flung him across his shoulder and sounded the retreat. Like magic the Pawnees faded away, leaving the Comanches fairly amazed by their unexpected victory.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SNAKES VS. WOLVES.

THE Comanches were taken completely by surprise, for the wolf-children were fully holding their own, if indeed the advantage lay not with them. And knowing this, not one attempted to follow the retreating foe, suspecting some cunning ruse hidden beneath the movement.

Rallying around Keoxa in answer to his cry, the panting braves looked to their weapons and awaited the expected assault. But as the minutes passed by without the anticipated yell and onset, the truth began to dawn upon them that the retreat was a fact and no artifice.

Then it was that they began to review their situation, to sum up the losses that they had sustained during the brief but hotly-contested hand-to-hand struggle. And not until then did Tony Chew note the disappearance of his comrade, Jack Rabbit. He glanced around, but saw him not, then blew sharply upon his crooked finger; the expected answer came not, and for a moment the dumb scout visibly trembled throughout his huge frame, as a sickening fear forced itself upon his heart.

Grasping a blazing brand from the nearest fire, he hurriedly yet thoroughly searched the blood-stained arena—but though there were many a once stout and hearty body lying scattered around, he could find no trace of his friend.

A faint, hazy light in the east betokened the speedy approach of the day-god. During the night the dumb scout had vanished, no one could tell where or how. Keoxa looked grave and cold, though he bent a willing ear to the low words of Felipe Raymon, as they silently crossed the valley and passed out through the narrow opening into the desert. A dozen stout braves accompanied the buffalo-hunter, and Pablo, his son, rode beside him.

Keoxa had, though with serious doubts as to its advisability, consented to place a few braves under the hunter's charge, and guided by Pablo, they were now going to rescue Rosina and Leon, if it lay in mortal power. They stole silently away through the gloom of early morning.

As they rode away from the circular valley and after covering such distance as they believed would insure them against detection by any of the Pawnee look-outs, Pablo was led to repeat his story, going more into detail, and both deep and bitter were the curses of the father as he realized the whole extent of Black Garote's treachery and villainy.

When Pablo at length announced their being near the huge boulder, one of the dismounted scouts came gliding back and uttered a few hasty words to the brave whom Keoxa had entrusted with their guidance, under Felipe Raymon. This Comanche spoke Spanish with sufficient fluency to render a conversation possible, and quickly translated the scout's report.

Not a quarter of a mile ahead of them a party of white men were busily working—burrowing around and beneath a huge rock. They had no look-outs, seemed utterly reckless of observation—were two-legged moles, as the scout bluntly put it. "Black Garote! if it is only he!" muttered Pablo, his eyes glittering, his hands closing upon his rifle.

"If it is, he may be able to tell us something about—"

"He'll have to speak quick, then. It's either his life or mine, on sight. I can't forget how he insulted Rosina."

Raymon sharply motioned Pablo to keep peace, though he did not appear seriously displeased by the spirit displayed by the young man. He consulted with Manketo, and finally decided as follows. Himself and Pablo would ride forward in advance, lest the diggers should take to the rocks on sighting the Comanches, and, if possible, learn the truth from Black Garote. The Comanches would be within reach in case the half-breed cibolero should attempt any further violence.

"There's nothing to learn from him more than what I have already told you," said Pablo, after they had ridden for a few moments in silence.

"That may be, and yet—many hours have passed since you parted with—Rosina, and—ha!"

At that moment they rounded an abrupt corner of the rocks, and came fairly upon the party of "human moles," busily undermining the huge mass of rock.

"Hold! Black Garote!" cried Raymon, sharply, as the huge half-breed clutched his rifle. "We come in peace, just now, and if you are wise you will meet us half-way."

"You can want nothing of me," was the sullen reply. "Go your way while you can. That young devil of a son of yours has wrought us enough harm already—"

"Not so much as he intends doing—it's my turn now, Black Garote! You beat me like a dog—like a dog you shall die!"

The last words were drowned by the sharp, spiteful crack, and, with a bullet-pierced brain, the giant buffalo-hunter stumbled backward, quivering in the agonies of death.

"I couldn't help it, father," cried Pablo, as he grasped the elder man's bridle-rein and turned to flee before the stupe-

fied hunters fairly realized what had occurred, "when I remember all that Rosina—"

A loud yell from the buffalo-hunters, accompanied by a couple of musket-balls and a number of feathered shafts, cut short the youth's speech, but no harm was done, and the next moment they were safe around the point of rocks. Only a few score yards away they saw Manketo and his braves advancing at a gallop, and so, a moment later, did the pursuers, who then halted, huddling together utterly demoralized.

Uttering their thrilling war-whoop, the Comanches swept by, unheeding the cry of Don Raymon. Possibly they had recognized some old enemy among the party, but be that as it may, the wretches met little mercy at the hands of the savages, who dismounted and followed them up over the rocks, massing them wherever overtaken.

Half an hour later Manketo returned to where the two Spaniards awaited him beside the boulder, two gore-dripping scalps hanging at his waist, his face cold and rigid as granite. He volunteered no explanation, nor did Raymon ask one.

In silence they examined the vicinity, in doubt whether to continue the seemingly hopeless task begun by Black Garote. It appeared impossible for them to move the huge mass enough to lay bare the den-like entrance to the mine.

But the question was speedily settled for them, once and for all. A savage came hastily up and reported the vicinity of full two-score horsemen—Pawnees—who were riding rapidly toward the spot.

The odds were too great to meet in open ground, and, his crafty mind fully upon the alert, Manketo glanced quickly around, and then bade his braves follow him. Leading their animals over the rugged trail, they obeyed, and in less than a minute more were in possession of the natural fortress selected by keen-eyed Manketo, just as the enemy turned into the little valley with a yell of discovery. They were indeed Pawnees, and, it may be stated here, were a party summoned by the smoke signals of Black Tiger from afar.

The position Don Raymon and Pablo now found themselves in was the best one that could have been found at such short notice. A sloping rock, so steep that it could only be scaled with great difficulty, its top covered with a dense growth of evergreens, beneath which they could lie unseen. Their animals were hastily but securely hopped at its base, and were safe from a stampede under cover of their rifles and bows.

The Pawnees seemed bent on ending all with one blow, and dismounting, rushed boldly forward, uttering their wild war-cry, yet taking advantage of every rock and cover. The two pale-faces were as cool and collected as their savage allies, and one after another father and son succeeded in picking off one of the foremost Pawnees. And then the bow-strings began to twang and the arrows to hurtle through the air. Still the wolf-children came on, and reaching the base of the rock, strove to ascend it. But daring as they were, this feat was impossible in the very teeth of the Comanches, and like magic the face of the rock was cleared, those below being knocked from their foothold by the shrapnel from above.

Shrill and exultant rung out the Comanche slogan as the enemy hastily retreated, but Don Raymon's brow was clouded darkly as he glanced around them.

"Look, Pablo," he muttered, gloomily, pointing to a higher point of rocks upon either hand not fifty yards as the crow flies. "Put half a dozen rifles up there, or even bows, and what can we do? Die like wolves shot down in a pen—unable to lift a finger in self-defense."

That the Pawnees had not overlooked these vantage points was quickly made evident, as arrow after arrow came from the western point, mingled with an occasional musket-ball. The besieged lay close, but the frail boughs of the stunted evergreens afforded them scant protection, and though the concealed marksmen were forced to aim at random, already blood had been drawn, though no lives were lost. Still, this good fortune could not last long, for a glimpse was caught of dusky figures scaling the eastern point, and though a constant fire was directed upon both coverts, the marksmen did not slacken their fire.

Though the sun was sinking fast, it was yet two hours above the horizon—and how many of their little band could hope to ever witness its setting?

Father and son crouched side by side, ready to take advantage of any exposure of the enemy, when suddenly Pablo fell back, the blood gushing in a stream from his breast, stricken down by a bullet from the eastern point of rocks.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SHARPSHOOTING.

THE day broke clear and pleasant over the circular valley, lighting up the torn, trampled, blood-stained sward, the ghastly pile of dead Comanches and the bodies of Pawnees lying as they fell in the desperate fight. Shining over the grimly silent survivors, many of whom bore bloody traces of the past night's work. Shining over the wild and rugged rocks upon every hand, looking down and commanding the "basin," revealing here and there a dark, nearly nude figure gliding among the boulders, or, in statuesque silence as though standing guard over the snake-children below.

From the highest peaks of rock still arose the tall, black columns of smoke that told his scattered braves that the Mad Chief required their assistance. Keoxa smiled grimly as he noted these prairie telegraphs. Possibly they might serve a purpose of which Black Tiger little thought.

The sun was near an hour above the eastern horizon, when Tony Chew made his reappearance, his face firmly set and even more than usually stern. He had been among the rocks, and had learned beyond a doubt that Jack Rabbit was a prisoner in the hands of the Black Tiger. With a skill peculiarly his own, the dumb scout had crept nearer and nearer, half-resolved to risk all upon one bold attack, and trust to setting Jack free under cover of the confusion; but he was not given the chance. Jack he did not get to see at all, but a few words of the Mad Chief gave him an inkling of the truth; then, as the gray light grew stronger, he cautiously retreated, and rejoined his red allies.

Squatting down and smoking his pipe, the big borderer fixed his eyes upon the square platform-like ledge, which his scout had convinced him lay before the entrance to a cave or den in the rocks. His patience was not tasked long. His strong white teeth bit through the stem of his pipe, as several human forms appeared upon the ledge, prominent among them the figure of the giant chief, whose right hand rested upon the shoulder of a bound, bareheaded prisoner—Jack Rabbit.

In a deep, sonorous voice, Black Tiger bailed the party below. Keoxa glanced inquiringly toward Chew, who nodded shortly and motioned the young chief to reply.

Speaking in Spanish, Black Tiger added:

"There has been much fighting between the children of the Wolf and Serpent, much blood has been shed, and many scalps taken. Both have fought well, because they are men, and knew that they were facing men. That is well and as it should be. But, as there is a time for fighting, so is there a time for peace.

"See! beside me stands a great warrior. His hand is very heavy, and his eye never fails him. The Pawnees will cover their heads with ashes whenever they hear his name. He is such a great warrior that he must be dear to the hearts of his friends. It would be a pity to doom him to the torture stake, to die by fire. Listen, then, while I point out the only way to prevent this.

"The wolf-children had two captives, the other night, but you took them from us. That was fair—we do not complain. But now it is our turn. We hold a captive well worth twenty common braves. Yet we offer him in exchange for the two whom you took from us—for the old, worn-out man and the woman, his squaw. If you agree, all will be well. The wolf-children will take them and go away, and let you depart in peace. Refuse, and not only does this brave die at the fire stake, but not one of you will ever live to see your people again. I have said. The rest lies with you," concluded the Mad Chief.

"Tell him to go to glory, old man Tony!" abruptly shouted Jack Rabbit. "If you surrender those helpless people for me, I'll curse—"

Black Tiger clasped a broad palm over the young scout's mouth and checked his further speech, holding Jack with resistless force, never flinching though the sharp white teeth met in his palm. And then, as the dumb scout flung forward the muzzle of his rifle, the Mad Chief raised Jack Rabbit bodily from the ground, and interposed his body as a shield as he hastily retreated toward the cave entrance.

Either fearing to trust his skill at that long range, or influenced by some other reason, Chew lowered his rifle and made a gesture of amity. Black Tiger paused, still shielded by the body of his prisoner, and cried:

"Lay aside your rifle and move away fifty yards from it, then I will listen to your answer."

Chew immediately complied, and then, with hands raised above his head, he made a few rapid gestures which were promptly translated by the young scout.

"I told you you might just as well spare yourself the trouble, old man. He says that I am a man, strong enough to take what is given me, and bear it as a man. That no one but a double-dyed coward and renegade would even dream of surrendering a woman into *your* hands. That is his answer, and I cordially endorse it—so do your level best and much good may it do you."

Tony made a quick impatient gesture, but if Jack had not rightly interpreted his mute speech, he was unable to undo the mischief. Yet Black Tiger noted the fact, and it evidently gave him hopes of his offer being accepted after all, and after consulting apart with two of his followers, he advanced alone to the edge of the rock and said:

"You have given your answer, and in doing so, have signed the death of your friend. But we are not impatient. We will wait until the sun touches yonder peak; if the exchange be not made before that hour, 'twill be forever too late."

Jack Rabbit was then bound securely to the trunk of a tree which grew close to the edge of the shelf, at its northern end. Directly in front of him, the rock fell almost perpendicularly for a dozen feet. To the rear rose the rocky hills above the cavern.

While this was being done, the dumb scout slowly moved his hands until Jack Rabbit slightly nodded his head in token of comprehension. Then Tony turned and strolled away as though at perfect ease in mind and body. Yet he was not idle. First approaching Senora Raymon, he made a motion as of one writing, and then, slowly tracing each letter, he made the lady aware of his plans, bidding her tell Keoxa what would be expected of him and his braves, when the moment of action came.

Whether the Pawnees observed the fact or no, during the next hour Keoxa and half a dozen picked braves vanished

from casual view. Yet a keen eye, if stationed in the circular valley, could have made out these dusky figures, cautiously stealing along from rock to rock, as though trying to reach the captive unseen. But such was not their intention, since they finally halted when some sixty yards from the base of the ledge.

Not till then did Tony Chew make a move. After seeing that his red allies were duly placed, he, bearing his heavy rifle, glided along, then dropped suddenly behind a boulder, some seven score yards from where Jack was secured, and in a position where the young scout's profile was brought into full view.

To fully chime in with what follows, the reader must remember that this story is dated long previous to the days of Creedmoor and Dollymount, before long range shooting was brought to such a pitch of perfection, and when long range rifles with their marvelous qualities were generally regarded as "very like a whale." Then to "throw your meat cold" at two hundred yards, was a feat for boasting of among mountain men. Remembering this, the reader can understand how carefully the dumb scout made all his preparations, and how carefully each shot was aimed, with what breathless interest he peered through the veil of blue smoke to note the effect. That is, after his first two shots, for they were aimed at the half-revealed forms of the Pawnee look-outs, and though they evidently had not been touched, the leaden missiles must not have passed far astray, for they henceforward kept their precious carcasses close hidden from the marksman.

Then Tony set to work with nerves braced like steel. No yell of agony followed his shots, though he knew that he was performing his work right well—better even than he had dared anticipate.

What was he firing at? Well, had one of the Pawnees been in a position to have looked upon the northern side of the tree-trunk to which Jack Rabbit was bound, he would have noticed a round, yellowish spot where the bullet entered and laid bare the inner bark. And more; at the second shot he would have noticed how loose one of the turns of cord hung—would have seen the severed ends, and have read the riddle of those deliberate, single shots.

This was the task Tony Chew had set himself; at one hundred and forty yards, to sever one by one the rawhide thongs which held his comrade bound to the tree-trunk; when the width of these thongs are estimated at not more than a half-inch, the necessary degree of skill may be fully appreciated.

Tony had to exercise his judgment in more ways than one, as, if suspicion should be aroused before the right moment, all would be lost. Hence he divided his shots between the thongs, the look-outs and the entrance of the cave, though his position prevented his firing directly into the latter.

Besides this, he had to guard against severing one portion of the thongs entirely while another portion remained untouched, as, should a few turns drop entirely off, the Pawnees could scarcely overlook the fact.

Fortune favored him beyond his most sanguine hopes. Five of the seven turns of rawhide were completely severed, leaving only one turn just below Jack Rabbit's armpits and another one confining his knees. The sun had but just passed the meridian, leaving him at least four more hours in which to work. And all this time none of the Pawnees appeared to suspect the real cause of the firing.

But now, whether his eyes were growing dim from the extraordinary strain upon them, or his rifle growing foul, Tony fired four shots at the lower turn without touching it. Then, hoping that Jack could kick the thong off, or burst it when otherwise free, Chew took deliberate aim at the other thong and fired.

Blending with the report came a hoarse, angry yell, and leaping to his feet he saw Black Tiger appear with uplifted hatchet, darting toward Jack, who was bound only with one turn, all the other thongs having dropped at his feet.

Keoxa and his men fired, but too hastily, and the doom of the young scout, who was desperately striving to free himself, seemed sealed beyond all hope.

Like an echo came a clear, piercing scream, and a light, graceful figure followed Black Tiger, with outstretched hands. It was that of Mini Lusa!

Whether intentionally or not, she doubtless saved Jack's life by stumbling against her father and making him miss his aim. The force of that unresisted blow caused him to stagger against the scout, whose clenched fist alighted full upon his throat, the blow hurling him headlong over the ledge upon the rocks below.

At the same moment Mini Lusa stooped and a knife flashed in the sunlight. Then Jack closed her in his arms and leaped over the ledge, just as a score of Pawnees sprung toward him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

UNITED AND SEVERED.

THE falling of the severed thongs leaving the prisoner apparently free and at entire liberty, the yell and angry rush of Black Tiger, the foiling of his aim by Mini Lusa and the lightning-like blow of the young scout, the bold leap for freedom, the mad yells of the Pawnees as they rushed to avenge the fall of their leader—all occupied but the space of a breath.

Tony Chew, revolver in hand, bounded forward to meet the fugitives and cover their retreat, a movement which was promptly imitated by Keoxa and his braves, yelling and plying their bows with vigor enough for double their number.

Despite the haste with which his leap was taken, Jack Rabbit alighted safely among the rocks below, holding Mini Lusa clear of the ground, then, leaping over the still quivering body of the Mad Chief, the young couple ran as fast as the tangled trail would admit toward their eager friends.

What the result would have been had not the Mad Chief fallen and left the Pawnees to their own devices; had instant and persistent pursuit been made, Jack and Mini must have been captured or slain; but instead, the Wolf-children gathered around the form of Black Tiger, who now gave signs of returning consciousness.

It was with a wild, almost breathless joy that the brother scouts clasped hands once more, and though no words were spoken, each perfectly understood the other.

"We must fall back, old man Tony," muttered Jack. "Those imps can run right over us here—back to the opening—chief, fall back!"

The young adventurer's orders were promptly obeyed, and once more the Comanches and their white allies were gathered together near the center of the circular valley. Stern and ready they awaited the coming shock, though as yet the Pawnees were upon the hillside, but Black Tiger had arisen and was now angrily gesticulating, probably cursing the stupidity of his braves. At least they cowered before him like one who, being bitterly reviled, dares not reply.

"Mini," said Jack, his lips almost touching the maiden's ear. "Mini, darling, you will not steal away from me again? You are mine—all mine now!"

"All yours—now and forever," came the low reply, so gently whispered that only the lover's ears could have interpreted the soft murmur.

The loud war-cry of the Mad Chief now rung out, and then the Pawnees charged over the rocks and into the level ground.

As before they were met with a steady, deliberately-aimed storm of bullets and arrows; as before, though their regular front was broken, the wolf-children faltered not, pressing forward to close quarters, fired by the example of their mad leader. His eyes were riveted upon the little knot of whites around whom the Comanches had closed at a sign from Keoxa.

Then came the shock as the rival bodies met. Once more weapons clashed loudly together, men fell dead or dying, and the hot, steaming blood stood in little pools upon the trampled soil. Hand to hand, breast to breast, dealing blow for blow with dogged ferocity, scorning to yield an atom even when plainly overmatched—thus the contest raged. It was a series of duels, where the vanquished received death, where the victor, never pausing for a second breath, immediately engaged a more successful foe.

For several minutes the scales were evenly balanced. The savage rivals fought with wonderful obstinacy. The Pawnees were led by Black Tiger, whose arm none seemed able to withstand, yet who was repeatedly baffled by Keoxa, who kept his best braves massed between the Mad Chief and the objects of his vengeance.

But then the terrible effects of the rapidly detonating revolvers became more and more plain, the foremost of the wolf-children melting away before the scouts' aim in swift succession, until the odds were upon the other side, and the Comanches began forcing the Pawnees back.

Mini Lusa stood between Jack and Tony, and to her presence beyond a doubt Black Tiger was indebted for his life. Had it been otherwise a deftly-planted bullet would have terminated the struggle at once and forever.

Still stubbornly contesting every foot of ground, the Pawnees were slowly forced back toward the rocks whence they had descended, leaving a trail of blood behind them, yet not all their own. Wounded and bleeding freely, Black Tiger seemed to be losing his marvelous power with every moment.

Keoxa was just gathering his braves for one final rush which was to end all, when a shrill yell, mingled with the heavy and rapid thud of horses' hoofs caused him to glance back toward the entrance to the basin. The vision was not a pleasant one to his eyes.

Full half a hundred mounted warriors were pouring into the circular valley, brandishing their weapons and pealing forth the shrill, unearthly war-whoop of the Pawnees.

"To the pocket! We can't fight 'em—to the pocket!" yelled Jack Rabbit, encircling Mini Lusa's waist with one arm. "Look to the others, old man Tony—quick! or the dogs will manage to cut us off yet!"

No one thought of disputing his order—there was no time for doing so, even if each had not realized that in the pocket lay their only hope of escape. And keeping close together, with the buffalo-hunter and his wife still in the center, they rushed rapidly across the valley.

Black Tiger also sprung forward, yelling for the mounted braves to cut off the fugitives, but his words were almost drowned by the wild clamor, and the favorable moment was allowed to pass unimproved.

Abruptly wheeling as the entrance was gained, Keoxa and his braves covered the whites as they hastily entered, then with a final volley of arrows, the Comanches followed, taking advantage of the cover afforded by the thick-lying boulders.

Mad with rage and baffled revenge, Black Tiger urged his braves on. Dismounting, they scrambled over the rocks under a galling fire from the concealed Comanches. But the

question was decided when Tony and Jack opened fire with their hastily reloaded pistols. Unable to strike a blow in return, the Pawnees hastily retreated, confident in the knowledge that their enemy could not escape them, feeling that their vengeance was only delayed, not eluded.

Keoxa was also grimly satisfied. He knew that his braves could keep the Pawnees out were they twice as numerous, until starvation came to the wolf-children's aid. And long before that period the yell of the Great Eagle would fill the air and his braves raise the siege. And then, having stationed his braves, he lighted his pipe and was soon enjoying the pleasant narcotic as thoroughly as though in his own lodge.

Jack and Tony were together, having placed Mini Lusa in the niche with Senora Raymon. The old scout was looking unusually grave, evidently deep buried in thought. Jack, on the contrary, was smiling and so full of joy that he wished some one to share it with him. The giant borderer bore his sallies for a time in gloomy quiet, but then, as though casting aside all doubts, he raised his hands and moved them rapidly. At first Jack uttered a little cry of wonder, and doubt was plainly written upon his face, but this expression vanished as the fingers moved more rapidly. When they ceased he arose and motioned Chew to follow him, his face pale and fixed, his limbs trembling beneath him as he finally stood before Senora Raymon.

"Tell her all—no, she cannot understand you. Tell your story and I will read it off. Now—quick!"

The fingers moved rapidly. Word by word Jack Rabbit interpreted the mute speech, his voice sounding hard and strained. In breathless silence the woman listened. While the shades of night deepened, the stars came out, the moon arose and cast its silvery beams down into the defile.

The story was a long one, slowly narrated. A brief synopsis will be all that needs recording here.

Many long years ago, a hunter, unarmed, weary and foot-sore, with wounds yet unhealed, was resting himself upon a hillside, when shrill cries, mingled with wild bursts of laughter and the sounds of blows, awakened his drooping senses. Stealing forward he saw a cruel scene. A man, a giant in height and strength, armed to the teeth, was flogging a little child with a quirt, until his limbs were bruised and bleeding. Unarmed though he was, the hunter would have interfered, but as though weary of his cruel sport, the brute dropped his whip and pushed the child into a hole in the hillside, fastening the entrance with a couple of heavy stones, then mounting his horse and riding away. As soon as he vanished the hunter pushed aside the rocks and brought out the sobbing child, leaving the spot as rapidly as his weakened form would admit. The child told him that the "bad man" had stolen him away from home, but could not tell his parents' names.

That night delirium seized upon the hunter, and for many a long day he knew nothing. When he recovered he was lying in the rude jacale of an Indian, the child playing beside him. It was months before he could stand upon his feet. When he regained strength, he sought in vain for the parents of the child. No one could guide him. Day by day his love for the little one grew until he no longer cared to find its family. Yet he had a mission to work out, and could not always bear the child with him, so he sought out a friend who was returning to the States and intrusted him with his treasure. Years passed. The child became a young man, handsome, brave and well-taught.

And then the borderer told how he had learned the parents of his foundling. How he had struggled with his love until a sense of justice triumphed.

"The child stands before you. When I found him, this chain and locket were around his neck," continued Chew, producing the article named from his possible sack.

Senora Raymon uttered a faint cry and fainted. She realized now how bitterly they had been deceived by the Mad chief, who, on discovering the loss of the real heir, had substituted another body, mutilated beyond recognition.

While Jack and Mini Lusa were endeavoring to restore Senora Raymon, Tony caught sight of a dark, creeping figure, and flung forward his rifle. But he did not fire. Just in time came a low signal which he recognized, and a moment later Manketo gently deposited a limp, seemingly lifeless body at his feet, and feebly rose erect as Keoxa came forward.

"Manketo has been drinking fire-water, that he cannot stand straight?" sharply began the chief.

"He is drunk with the blood of Pawnee dogs," proudly replied the brave, turning so that the moon shone full upon the ghastly wounds that seamed his chest.

At that moment Senora Raymon sprang forward and fell upon the motionless body, covering the pale, upturned face with kisses. It was that of Pablo Raymon.

"You come back alone?" slowly uttered Keoxa.

"Yes, I carried him. The others died—striking the enemy. So would I, only for him. He is too brave for a Pawnee dog to dance over his scalp."

A wild yell came from the hilltop, and then a huge boulder crashed heavily down the slope.

CHAPTER XXXV. BESIEGED.

WHEN the rifle-shot came, followed by the wild yells as the suddenly aroused Pawnees sprang to their feet, Leon Sandoval naturally supposed the shot was fired at him—that some one of the savages had been aroused by his bold exploit. With this belief his first thought was to flee, and he even took several steps toward the spot where he had parted from Rosina; but then he paused. Better die fighting where he stood than lead the savage hounds to a second and more helpless victim. And dropping food and drink he prepared to dispute their passage while his arms could wield a weapon.

But the hubbub gradually subsided, and none of the savages left the outer chamber, at least in Sandoval's direction. Hope revived, and with it came curiosity. The young buffalo-hunter crept cautiously forward until he could peer around the curve. He saw

the Pawnees were quieted down, some talking, others smoking their freshly-filled pipes. It was all a puzzle to him, though ere long he made a shrewd guess at the truth; that one of the somnolent sentinels had let fall his carbine and the shock had discharged it.

Satisfied that there was no hope of leaving the cavern by this outlet, at least until the Indians had left, Leon, with new cause for fear, cautiously returned to where he left Rosina. Though a silent, it was a joyous meeting. She had heard the shot, and naturally feared lest it had been discharged at her lover.

In cautious whispers Sandoval told her of his discoveries.

"We must find some good hiding-place where we can lie concealed until they leave. There's danger in every moment we spend here. Come, darling—keep close behind me—we must feel our way, for a time, at least.

Not daring to light a torch, Sandoval cautiously groped his way through the dark, sounding the ground before him with one of the fagots still remaining, to guard against an accident similar to that which had befallen Pablo. Thus with one hand gliding along the side wall while the other felt his way, Leon proceeded for some minutes.

Next to having found the chamber which opened out upon the hillside, unoccupied, this forced retreat in the dark was the most fortunate thing that could have happened to the fugitives, though, at the time, it would have been difficult to convince Leon that such was the case.

As he groped along through the darkness, Sandoval was guided by the side wall, and, as a natural consequence, he diverged into the first passage branching from that side, nor did he discover the fact, his senses being so fully occupied, and listening with painful intentness for the sounds which he prayed would not come—the yell of discovery and pursuit.

The hunter's hand suddenly slid from the wall. Feeling around, he found—by the sharp corners—that they stood upon the verge of a chamber or enlargement of the passage. Then a low cry from Rosina startled him!

"See! a light—above our heads!"

Sandoval raised his eyes, and his heart throbbed with painful force. Above them—how high he could only conjecture—was a light spot, in the exact center of which glowed and twinkled a bright star. There could be no mistake—they were gazing upon the outer world!

Almost fearing to remove his eyes from the glorious vision, Sandoval bade Rosina remain motionless and await his return. Then he moved slowly about, until he fully satisfied himself that the opening was no delusion, that it was near the center of the roof or vault of the chamber in which they stood. Groping his way back, he said:

"We must pass through that, Rosina, and the sooner the better. And yet—we must have light to guard us. It will be a risk—though we have come a good ways from where we stumbled across the heathen."

"Do as you think best—I trust you in everything," simply replied the maiden.

"Thank you, pet. It is a risk we must run, if we hope to see our friends once more. Aided by a light and my lasso, I believe I can climb up there, and if the rope is only long enough—but it *must* be! Once up there, I can haul you up—and then, good-by to the bloody-minded heathen and ho! for our friends!"

"Holy Mother grant that it may turn out as you say!" muttered Rosina.

Sandoval crouched down close to the wall and prepared to strike a light. His efforts were successful, and in a few minutes later his torch was blazing brightly.

First assisting Rosina to a perch upon a little ledge, some yards above the level of the floor, Leon began his work. This was slow and difficult. The torch cast its rays but a few feet, and beyond this all was conjecture. Sandoval was obliged to cast his lasso around the highest visible point, then climb up to it, perhaps to find his labor all in vain and have to retrace his steps. Still, he knew that it must be done—he was working for even more than life, and with dogged perseverance he stuck faithfully to his task until, when the gray light of morning streamed in at the hole, he reached the opening and crawled through it. Ah, what a blessed moment was that!

Yet one hasty glance around was all that he permitted himself. Returning, he dropped the lasso at full length. It lacked full a dozen feet of reaching the floor—as well a mile. So at least he thought, bitterly, in his first disappointment.

But then his strong common sense returned. Peering down from his perch he saw how the feat could be accomplished, with patience. Cautiously he descended to the point of rock from which he had reached the entrance, and thus to another, making use of his faithful lasso.

He directed Rosina to descend to the floor, and then explained to her how she was to secure the noose around her body. In silence, confiding implicitly in her lover, Rosina obeyed, and then, slowly, cautiously, straining every muscle, Sandoval drew up his precious load, foot by foot, until her round arms clasped his neck and her moist lips gratefully, lovingly pressed a kiss upon his.

The most difficult part of the task was over, and in ten minutes later the lovers stood side by side upon the mountain, breathing the fresh morning air, reveling in the rays of the glorious sun.

Rosina sunk upon her knees and breathed a silent, heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving. Sandoval uncovered his bowed head in mute reverence.

"And now," he said, at length, breaking the silence, "come—every moment will seem an hour to your friends until you rejoin them."

"To carry black sorrow to their hearts—poor, poor Pablo!" murmured Rosina, her eyes moistening.

Leon drew her to his breast, pressing his lips to her brow. He knew how vain and empty words of consolation would sound, and did not attempt them, but gently drew her along in the direction which his hunter's instinct told him they must follow in order to regain the wagon-train.

He did not forget the Indians whom he had seen. Knowing that, in all probability they were still near at hand, he used all possible precautions against discovery, keeping under cover of the boulders and stunted bushes as much as he could, scanning the rocks and points around with a keen, restless gaze.

And yet, all his precautions were of little avail.

When they had passed over nearly a mile of ground, Sandoval dropped suddenly to the ground, dragging Rosina with him. The forms of half a dozen savages had come into view around a huge boulder, not three hundred yards away, directly in their course.

Quick and prompt as was his action, it was too late to avert discovery. A wild yell, bloodthirsty and malignant, burst from the savages, and brandishing their weapons they leaped toward the fugitives.

With an arm around Rosina's waist, Sandoval arose and turned to flee. Not at random. Knowing that such a chase must be short—that a collision must soon come, he headed at once for a covert from which he might hope to make a good fight, and if not defeat the enemy, at least hold them in check until the sounds of firing should attract her friends to the rescue. Had he only known how hardly those friends were even then bested!

The Pawnees gained rapidly, but fortunately the fugitives had not far to go. A huge boulder, with three sides almost perpendicular, its top covered with stunted bushes, the fourth side barely slanting and ragged enough for a nimble, sure-footed man to scale—such was the natural fort which Sandoval had noticed in passing, little thinking how soon he would have to test its efficacy.

Clambering up the rock, assisting Rosina before him, the buffalo-hunter turned and drew a bead upon the foremost of his pursuers. True to its aim, the bullet sped upon its errand of death. With a shrill, horrible yell of agony, the Indian sprung into the air, falling to the earth a quivering, lifeless mass of clay.

Yelling madly, the Pawnees came on, burning for revenge—on until they reached the rock—still on, climbing, clinging to every point of rock—thinking only of the feast of blood which awaited them above.

Given no time to reload, Sandoval stooped and grasped one of the rocks at his feet. This he dashed upon the head of the nearest savage, with such force that the skull was shattered like an egg-shell. Another followed, and with like effect. The face of the rock was cleared as by magic, under the influence of the blood-stained stones and the convulsed bodies. As though dismayed by the loss of half their number in little more than as many seconds, the survivors sprung behind the nearest coverts, giving the buffalo-hunter a much needed respite.

He crouched down beside Rosina, hastily loading his rifle, not knowing at what moment it might be needed.

"Listen!" cried Rosina. "Our friends—!"

The distant sound of rifle-shots—the shrill yells; mingled with duller rumbling, crashing sounds—could now be heard. Sandoval grated his teeth together. He knew now that there was nothing to hope for from the train. Beyond a doubt they were attacked by savages, and had their hands full.

Again Rosina called his attention—this time pointing afar off over the distant desert. A dust-cloud was visible, steadily increasing. Then it was partially dispelled, revealing the forms of horsemen—of long lances and floating trappings.

"God help them now!" muttered Leon. "More of the blood-thirsty heathen are coming—"

An exultant yell from the Pawnees below interrupted him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GREAT EAGLE.

PALE and haggard, yet stern and almost stonily calm were the faces upon which the first rays of the morning sun shone, down in the half-filled pocket. As a cat plays with a mouse, so the Pawnees seemed amusing themselves—at intervals hurling down a huge boulder, or dispatching an arrow or bullet upon its mission of death—then relapsing into perfect silence, until it seemed impossible that so many blood-thirsty heathen were lurking around the rocky fastness.

Jack Rabbit—for such we must still call him—lay curled up at the feet of his mother, sleeping, completely exhausted by his long watching and anxiety. Senora Raymon was watching over the deep, death-like slumber of her wounded son, Pablo, trembling lest his waking should be only in death.

Mini Lusa crouched down in a little niche, close beside Jack Rabbit—her eyes were riveted upon his face with a gaze that could not be mistaken. Of rapid growth, of curious birth, the strength of their love could not be measured in words. Fiery, burning, yet pure, it could only find an end in death—if then.

Tony Chew stood near by, his eyes also upon the face of his idolized pupil and comrade. There was a nervous twisting of his lips—a sad, regretful look in his eyes that told how immense was the sacrifice he had made in giving Jack back to his people.

And thus the minutes rolled on.

Keoxa, the Comanche chief, sprung erect, his head bent in listening. The faint report of a rifle—the sounds of wild yells; these his ear caught, and for a moment a strange fire lighted up his face, as he thought of his father—the Great Eagle. But no—these sounds were receding. It could not be the Great Eagle.

There came a loud, crashing thud as a boulder was started from above, leaping, bounding madly from point to point. Keenly was its course watched by the besieged, and all hearts gave a thankful throb as they believed it would fall clear of them. It strikes upon a rock—rebounds swiftly at an abrupt angle. One shrill cry of horror—drawn involuntarily from a stout brave's lips as he saw inevitable death—then the boulder concealed all.

The hills seemed full of swarming devils. From every side—save one alone—came wild, ear-splitting screeches. The rocky avalanche was renewed—rifle-shots and arrows filled the air. Pandemonium seemed loosed upon earth.

High and shrill arose the young chief's warning cry. He had not overlooked the significant fact that no sound came from the entrance to the pocket. And with his knowledge of Indian craft, he felt sure that all this uproar was but a blind to cover some more deadly attack.

"The Pawnee wolves are fools—they think their yelping will blind us! Strike home, my braves! They come to find death at the hands of men!"

His last words were blended with the report of the dumb scout's rifle, carrying death to a skulking red-skin. Thus unmasked, the Pawnees abandoned their hope of a surprise, and yelling in horrible chorus, scrambled over the rocks, resolved to end all by one desperate charge and hand to hand struggle.

On they came, despite the cracking of rifles, the twanging of bow-strings, the crashing of boulders. And from the heights above, dropping from point to point with the activity and sure-footedness of a mountain sheep, the wolf-children hastened to the aid of their brethren, eager to play their part in the dread tragedy.

The rapidly detonating revolver joined in the deadly play. Fragments of rock were hurled by stout hands otherwise unarmed. And still the Pawnees came on—nearer and nearer, until the struggle became hand to hand. Rifles and muskets were clubbed, hatchets and knives clinked together. Breast to breast the desert rivals strove for mastery. Tight locked in each other's arms they struggled. Tight locked in each other's arms they died, victors yet vanquished.

It was a duel to the death. Not one of them all, even when death stared them in the face, dreamed of asking or receiving mercy. Life and defeat could not join hands.

Side by side fought the trio: Keoxa, Jack Rabbit and the dumb scout. There alone the wolf-children were beaten back. And there a rampart of dead steadily grew in height before the heroes.

Yet numbers will prevail. Where one Pawnee fell, two others sprung into the space left vacant by his death. Not so with the defenders. Each death-groan left them more ground to cover—more blows to withstand, a greater pressure to bear up against.

Such a terrible, killing struggle could not last long. One by one the defenders fell. Not one among the survivors but bore some trace of the wolf-children's claws. Slowly but surely they were being overpowered.

Ha! what is that?

Two lightning blows disposed of his most troublesome antagonists, and then Keoxa lifts his head, his eyes flashing, his nostrils dilating. His voice rises—high above the devilish tumult.

And then—the answer comes!

Shrill and piercing, almost unearthly in its notes—the shriek of an eagle—the war-cry of Quanhtli, of Great Eagle, the head chief of the Comanches!

Only two well do the wolf-children know that yell! Often has it sounded in their ears—as often followed by sore wailing and bitter mourning among the Pawnee lodges.

They think no more of fighting. Casting aside their weapons, everything that can impede their flight, they clamber frantically up the rocks. But death follows them close. The tables are turned, and now the fugitives become the pursuers. The dumb scout, Keoxa and Jack Rabbit lead. And guided by the cries of the young chief, the fresh Comanches speedily effect a surround.

It becomes a massacre. The details are too bloody—too revolting for record here. Enough that from that day the band of the notorious Black Tiger was no more.

Once more it is day. Once more the circular valley is thickly peopled.

In one group are collected the most of our friends. Jack Rabbit holds Mini Lusa by the hand, and he stands before his mother.

"Not only a son, but a daughter—will you welcome her, my mother?"

Senora Raymon, her eyes yet wet with mourning over the loss of her husband, drew the sobbing maiden to her motherly breast and pressed a kiss upon her brow.

"God bless you both, my children!"

"And may I, too, hope for a share in your blessing?" said Leon Sandoval, uncovering his head as he drew Rosina to him.

"And I'm the only solitary one!" laughed Pablo faintly from his couch of robes. "But have patience, mother dear—I'll find you another daughter as soon as we get back home again—never fear!"

Need there more be said? Why follow the long trail? Enough that it was successfully made under the escort of Keoxa—that Pablo recovered from his wounds—that the lovers were married—that Tony Chew found a peaceful home with Jack and Mini Lusa until death bade him take up the last, long trail.

EPILOGUE—WHAT THE VULTURE SAW.

Its wings brushing the clouds, its eyes turned downward, slowly circling around each turn carrying it nearer the earth, sailed a vulture in the first rays of the morning sun.

Rough, ragged hills, rock-covered, split into huge fragments, with yawning chasms here and there, deep, black abysses—a scene of desolation. Yet 'tis inhabited.

Two men—their apparel torn, soiled and stained dark with blood. One is lying prostrate, bound hand and foot. A look of utter horror is upon his face.

A rattlesnake crawling closely by, pauses, coils, sounds its alarm and bends back its lance-shaped head to strike. The standing man springs forward and crushes it beneath his heel, laughing discordantly.

"Thank me for your life, Felipe Raymon!"

The bound man shuddered and could not suppress a groan of agony.

Again laughing, the madman grasped his victim, and held him half-suspended over the dark pit. From the gloom came a chilling, blood-curdling sound. Through the darkness glow and scintillate scores of twin points of light. Combined with the skirring noise, the solution is plain.

A groan of horror—a faint prayer for mercy—a discordant laugh. And the dark-winged scavenger swoops still lower.

The madman now works with an ardor resembling frenzy. He binds the end of a stout lasso around the doomed man's feet. The other extremity he winds around a large boulder. He severs the bands around his victim's wrists. He hurles him fiercely forward.

A shriek of horror from the victim's lips—a dull twang as the rope is extended.

The madman leans far over the pit, laughing shrilly. He sees the swaying body—the aroused serpents rattling angrily and leaping at the wretch from every side, and then—

A portion of the rock gives way beneath him. Vainly he seeks to recover his balance. Down—down! One despairing cry—a dull thud!

The vulture swoops lower, and settles upon a point of rock, peering eagerly down through the gloom. Twice he is startled from his perch by the muffled, choking shrieks—as often does he return. Then all is still.

The vulture floats down and settles to his feast.

THE END.

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